The Women’s War of 1929
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Gender and Violence in Colonial Nigeria

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In memory of Misty’s husband, John Svatek, the reluctant Africanist
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Chronology of Major Events

1857 – first permanent mission in Igboland is established in Onitsha by Rev. John Christopher Taylor, who was born in Sierra Leone of Igbo parents

1865 – Church Missionary Society mission established in Bonny

1888 – Presbyterians set up a mission station to convert the Igbo

1902 – Aro-Chukwu Expedition, culminating in the destruction of the so-called “Long Ju-Ju” oracle; sterling introduced as the official currency of the area

1912 – the beginning of Lugardism and Native Administration in southeastern Nigeria

1915 – “Garrick Braide” movement begins

1918 – British attempt to abolish local currencies altogether

1924 – three thousand women “riot” in Calabar when a market toll is required by the government

late 1925 – Nwaobiala dancers appear in Owerri and present a message to local warrant chiefs and elders

early 1926 – Nwaobiala dancing gradually disappears; participants fined

1927 – British colonial administrators attempt to make an accurate census count of Igbo men and their property for purposes of taxation

1928 – first direct taxation of men in southeastern Nigeria

October 1929 – Captain John Cook, temporarily assigned to Bende as District Officer, decides to re-do the Bende census and asks that women and domestic animals be counted

mid-October 1929 – rumors begin to spread through women’s mkiri that women are to be taxed

November 2, 1929 – Nwanyeruwa and Mark Emeruwa engage in battle over “counting” in Oloko; Nwanyeruwa confirms to the Oloko women that they are to be taxed

November 24, 1929 – Oloko women “sit on” Warrant Chief Okugo; several women are hurt; news of Nwanyeruwa’s case spreads throughout the area and women flood into Oloko

late November 1929 – Okugo tried for assault at Bende; thousands of women march to hear the case

early December 1929 – women march throughout Owerri and Calabar, protesting taxation and making formal complaints about warrant chiefs’ corruption; some “rioting”
December 13, 1929 – women of Oloko send a telegram to the women of Aba, ask them to disband

December 16, 1929 – women march in Utu Etim Ekpo; police fire on the crowd; 18 women die and 19 are wounded

December 17, 1929 – large crowd gathers at Opobo; police again open fire; 38 women are killed and almost as many wounded

December 20, 1929 – British report that the disturbances are under control

late December 1929–early January 1930 – sporadic incidents of demonstration continue

early January 1930 – first commission of “riots” meets, with little success

March 1930 – second inquiry, Aba Commission, meets and spends several months hearing testimony and working on its Report
Marc Matera: As this book has been a long time in the making, there are too many people who have given me crucial support and encouragement along the way to thank them all by name. Nonetheless, I would like to thank my first mentor and advisor, Susan Kent, and all of the faculty members in the History Department at the University of Colorado, Boulder, especially Martha Hanna, for shepherding me through the beginnings of this project and towards the completion of my M.A. Since my contribution to the book grew out of my M.A. thesis, I owe thanks to the Graduate School at the University of Colorado for providing the summer funding which enabled me to conduct the research for it. After I moved on to pursue my Ph.D. at Rutgers University, many of the professors in the History Department showed great interest in this project over the years. I would like to thank Carolyn Brown and Temma Kaplan for their thoughtful readings of and useful comments on my M.A. thesis, as well as Keith Wailoo, who graciously allowed us to use his office as a workspace as we moved forward with the book project. Above all, I owe a debt larger than I could ever repay to Bonnie Smith, who has been and continues to be a mentor and model scholar for me since the first day I set foot on the Rutgers campus. Finally, I want to thank my colleagues in the History Department at Northern Arizona University, especially Scott Reese, Susan Deeds, and Sanjam Ahluwalia, for their interest in the project and their encouragement as the fruits of our long laborers came to fruition.

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Nigeria Women's War Map © John Svatek
“Nigerian Women Threaten Naked Protest at Oil Plant,” trumpeted the headline of a Denver Post story on July 15, 2002. “Unarmed village women holding 700 ChevronTexaco workers inside a southeast Nigeria oil terminal,” the story below read, “let 200 of the men go Sunday but threatened a traditional and powerful shaming gesture if the others try to leave—removing their own clothes.” The article reported on the taking of an oil facility in Escavros (Ugborodo) in the Niger Delta by local women seeking to use their “weapon of nakedness” to force ChevronTexaco (CT) to accede to their demands for a number of reforms: greater employment opportunities for local men; infrastructural resources like electricity, running water, and schools to better living conditions in their villages; the creation of fish farms to replace the fishing destroyed by the company’s polluting of rivers and streams; and improvement of the environment degraded by oil spills and gas flares, which the women understood to be harming their children. Faced with the possibility that other groups of protesting women would conduct their own occupations of oil facilities across the Delta, CT eventually gave in to many of the women’s demands, promising to hire a number of local men and committing to build roads, a school, and electricity and water systems.\(^1\)

To western eyes an unintelligible if titillating form of dissent, the threat or actual removal of clothing by southeastern Nigerian women was part of a long, local history of articulating deeply held grievances and effecting change through women’s embodied demonstration.\(^2\) The most famous of these incidents took place in November and December of 1929, when a remarkable series of demonstrations, protests, risings, and riots involving tens of thousands of Igbo- and Ibibio-speaking women took place throughout southeastern Nigeria. The “Aba Riots,” as the British dubbed them at the time in what was on one level a bid to efface their extraordinary nature, were known to their participants and to subsequent West African memory and historiography as the *Ogu Umunwaanyi*, the Women’s War. In the course of it, more than fifty Igbo and Ibibio women were killed by British troops and an unknown number were wounded and otherwise traumatized.\(^3\) Their Women’s War marked a historical high point in West African resistance to colonialism, not least because the activities of southeastern women during this brief moment of gender rebellion made an indelible impression on all who witnessed it, Britons and Africans alike.

The war broke out on November 24, 1929, when rumors that the British planned to tax women reached the village of Oloko in Bende district. In response to what appeared to be efforts by the local warrant chief, Okugo, to assess their numbers and wealth, a large crowd of Igbo women surrounded the chief’s compound and “sat on” him, a locally recognized practice undertaken when men committed offenses against women. When “sitting on a man,” women danced and sang until the object of their grievance acknowledged his offense and promised to make restitution.\(^4\) In this particular instance, Okugo not only refused to admit to any wrong-doing, he set male members of his compound on the women, causing injury to eight of them. Angered by their treatment and dissatisfied with Okugo’s previous disrespectful behavior towards them, the Oloko women sent a deputation to the district officer at Bende, Captain John Cook, to complain about Okugo’s actions.

While the deputation of Oloko women conferred with Cook, women from Aba, Owerri, and Ikot Ekpene arrived in Oloko, and, upon hearing that Cook had agreed to try Okugo, moved on to Bende, gathering up other women en route. By the time they arrived, their numbers had reached into the thousands, and Cook had handed over his commission to Captain John Hill. “The women,” Hill testified later, “numbering over ten thousand, were shouting and yelling round the office in a frenzy. They demanded [Okugo’s] cap of
office, which I threw to them and it met the same fate as a fox’s carcass thrown to a pack of hounds.” Satisfied by Hill’s promise that Okugo would be tried in the colonial courts for assault and that women would not be taxed, the women disassembled and returned to their villages without incident.

Persistent rumors of taxation of women and news of the women’s victory at Bende spread to other towns and villages, where women met in late November and early December to discuss their situation. On December 9, a crowd of women estimated to number 1,000 attacked the native court at Owerrinta, knocking the caps from the heads of warrant chiefs, damaging property, and destroying documents. The next day, December 10, crowds of women gathered at Aba, where they again attacked the native court and then looted Barclay’s Bank and a number of European warehouses, locations where palm oil, the staple product of women’s economic activity, was stored. A week later, on December 15, at Utu Etim Ekpo, in Calabar Province, women attacked the native court, a warehouse, and the houses of the clerks employed there. When they turned their attention to demanding a meeting with the district officer, troops were called in; when the women insisted upon proceeding to the district officer’s offices, the troops opened fire on them with rifles and a Lewis gun, killing eighteen.

The following day, December 16, 1929, a bigger crowd of women met at Opobo, where they demanded a written statement from the district officer that asserted, among other things, that women would not be taxed. While they waited for the agreement to be typed up, the women grew increasingly restless, pushing on the fence that held them outside the yard of the district office and offering up insults to the troops inside the fence line. Just as the fence began to give way, the lieutenant in charge of the troops gave an order to fire. The soldiers shot and killed thirty-nine women and one man; an additional eight women were pushed by the retreating crowd into the river below and drowned; thirty-one women lay wounded by gunfire.

Upon hearing of the incidents, Secretary of State for the Colonies Sidney Webb (Lord Passfield) immediately convened a commission chaired by Major William Birrell Gray to investigate the “disturbances.” Then, fearful that the initial commission’s report would be insufficient to assuage the British-educated, Nigerian elite in Lagos and especially the general public and members of parliament in Britain, he ordered a second, more extensive inquiry (popularly known as the Aba Commission) in March 1930. The terms of the Aba Commission’s inquiry were far wider than those of its predecessor. Its investigations were supposed to be as thorough as possible, and, to that end, the commissioners included British colonial administrators, African and European barristers, and counsel representing the Crown itself. The Aba Commission traveled throughout the “affected area” and held courts of inquiry at the sites of major demonstrations. Colonial officials and Nigerian men appeared before the commissioners, while the general public and southeastern Nigerian women, in particular, were encouraged to attend its sessions. It appears that many of these women saw the inquiry as a general trial for the warrant chiefs, not unlike the one held for Chief Okugo on the insistence of the women of Oloko, and their rhetoric reflected, among other things, common indigenous ideas about the proper representation of a “case” before village elders.

The commission recorded women’s statements as carefully as those of the warrant chiefs, district officers, missionaries, European businessmen, and others who testified. At least one member of the Aba Commission, Mr. Graham Paul, took their words quite seriously, observing, “No one listening to the evidence given before us could have failed to be impressed by the intelligence, the power of exposition, the directness and the mother-wit which some of the leaders exhibited in setting forth their grievances and the lessons to be learnt from their demonstrations should be taken to heart.” Some women did express satisfaction with the proceedings, especially those women from Oloko who saw the despised Chief Okugo deposed and given a sentence of two years’ imprisonment. Many others demanded more from the British, such as insisting that women should henceforth be involved in the selection process for warrant chiefs. But the end of the Aba Commission also marked the end of southeastern Nigerian women’s grand egwu (song/dance performance) or at least that part of it known among the Igbo-speaking women of
southeastern Nigeria as the *Ogu Umunwaanyi* and to the British as the “Aba Riots.”

Until the late 1960s and early 1970s, scholars presented the *Ogu Omunwaanyi* from the perspective of British administrators and their apologists. In this view, the *Ogu* became the “Aba Riots,” and was seen purely as the result of the feminine forces of Igbo conservatism fighting against inevitable and necessary progress that would be brought to Igboland by colonial administrators. This school conceded that abuses of the warrant chief system were real, but they were not regarded as serious enough to trigger the events of 1929. Contemporaries of the colonial administrators finally settled on taxation as the true culprit, and apologists for colonial rule in Africa such as Margery Perham and Sylvia Leith-Ross spent a great deal of time and energy defending the policies that required the imposition of taxation in southern Nigeria.

From this view emerged a portrait of the Women’s War as the action of a rude, uncivilized mob, too “frenzied” to think about the destruction it was leaving in its wake. Old stereotypes about the childishness of the African and the basic conservatism of women were invoked to explain what had happened on the ground in 1929. Rather than taking the women and their complaints seriously as members of the newly-created colony making a radical critique of the colonial system, Perham and her followers looked for conspiracies to incite riot—particularly among dissatisfied Igbo men, who supposedly used the women as some sort of a smokescreen for their subversive activities.

As Igbo scholars and Igbo academic sympathizers entered into the discussion in the late 1960s, a somewhat different view of the *Ogu Umunwaanyi* emerged. Excepting Harry Gailey, whose analysis in many ways continued the old line while purporting to deal with the deeper background of the movement, late twentieth-century scholars of the period attempted to broaden their interpretations of the events of late 1929 to include the local political and economic context in which those events were embedded. Judith Van Allen—whose work helped to make the *Ogu* into a centrally important case for much subsequent feminist writing—looked to indigenous political institutions for an explanation of the events and showed that Igbo women’s associations facilitated women’s organization in Igboland at the time. Nina Mba’s early 1980s scholarship built upon Van Allen’s to analyze the local economic situation and its effect upon the *Ogu* in some detail. A. E. Afigbo, the dean of Igbo historical studies, and Elizabeth Isichei presented comprehensive historical analyses that took into account both the political and the economic, while focusing only briefly upon the cultural material that forms the basis of this book. Afigbo’s work, meant as an indigenous response to the master narrative created by Perham and her descendents, focused mainly on the warrant chief system and its considerable possibilities for abuse. Practically, this meant that he rarely brought the women of the *Ogu* onto center stage, while Isichei’s material—because of the large time frame of Igbo history that she attempted to cover—was too general to give us a really detailed analysis of the events of 1929. Caroline Ifeka-Moller, of the second generation of scholars to look at the *Ogu*, and more recently still, Ekwere Otu Akpan and Violetta I. Ekpo, Ifi Amadiume, and Gloria Chuku have sought to understand the cultural underpinnings of the events. Ifeka-Moeller outlined some ideas about Igbo women’s religious practices in the short, mid-1970s essay she published on the events. Akpan and Ekpo broadened our knowledge of what scholars had regarded as the *Igbo* Women’s War by demonstrating how widespread was the participation in the *Ogu* of non-Igbo women in southeastern Nigeria. Amadiume addressed the Women’s War in the course of a broader book demonstrating that African women resisted patriarchal ideas before European women fully banded together to do so. Chuku’s comprehensive and astute analysis of the role women played in the economic transformation of southeastern Nigeria between 1900 and 1960 gave attention to the profound cultural changes wrought by colonization and addressed Igbo women’s resistance to the alteration of their political, economic, and cultural universe. But like Isichei’s work, Chuku’s treatment of the Women’s War remained necessarily curtailed by the broad scope of her book, which focused extensively on material aspects of Igbo women’s lives.

The work of indigenous and more perceptive Africanist scholars from the late 1960s onwards, then, has
problematized the colonial understandings of the Women’s War. However, some aspects of the earlier patriarchal discourse lurked within even nationalist and feminist scholarship done on southeastern Nigeria, particularly inasmuch as these accounts continued to locate the meaning of the Ogu almost entirely in the question of taxation. Resolving the question of why southeastern Nigerian women rose up against the British in 1929 with the observation that women were unhappy about the prospect of being taxed hardly accounts for the scope and passion of the protests. After all, the colonial government had imposed a tax on southeastern Nigerian men first without an incident comparable to the Ogu. Nor does the economic and political situation in the region in the 1920s fully explain the form taken by the women’s demonstrations. These were redolent with symbolic actions and objects springing directly from indigenous religious practice, even while demonstrating signs of a consciousness of the region’s enforced engagement with events and commodities from outside the confines of the colony. As will become apparent in what follows, we respectfully disagree with Mba’s assertion that “there is little evidence of any cultural or religious protest in the Women’s War, with the exception of their opposition to interference by the warrant chiefs in marriage cases…Nor were the women fighting against the white man, as their behavior during the war bears out.”

We argue that the political and economic factors that gave rise to the Ogu Umunwaanyi cannot be separated from Igbo and other southeastern social systems, which were being transformed by and reacting to their engagement with the tenets of colonial, western society. To make this point clearer, and hopefully to answer the question of why women should be the focal point of southeastern Nigerian resistance to the British in 1929, we explore local worldviews, the spatial arrangements of the market and the lineage compound, women’s associations, the effect of mission Christianity upon women’s contemporary roles in the region, and the changes faced by indigenous women during the 1920s in their position vis-à-vis men and their society in general. We then juxtapose the universe within which southeastern Nigerian women operated against that of the other major participants in this “women’s movement”—British colonial, missionary, and mercantile actors. In doing so, we take seriously the call of Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff for an ethnography of the colonial state, concurring in their insistence that “the West and the rest, long locked in historical embrace, cannot but be interrogated together.”

Virtually all scholars studying Nigeria have examined at least some aspects of the Ogu; only three treatments of British colonialism in Africa, by contrast, address the Women’s War. No one has analyzed it from the multiple perspectives of its colonized and colonial participants in the same text. As a consequence, although much of the extant scholarship provides rich insights into the Women’s War, it often relies upon assumptions regarding the mindset and motivations of one or other side in the conflict, thereby obscuring important elements of the movement and its suppression. The present volume sets out not only to historicize the Ogu within the history of colonial Nigeria, but also to examine the various perspectives of the main protagonists within a single, gendered analytical frame.

The scholarship treating the response of the British to the Ogu has discussed it almost exclusively in terms of changes they introduced to colonial policy in the unruly provinces of southeastern Nigeria. No one has explained why the British officials on the scene reacted the way they did, although both Afigbo and Gailey—and just recently, Toyin Falola—attend to the reactions of British officials and to local male interpretations of the women’s actions. While the women mobilized in large numbers across much of southeastern Nigeria and clearly intended some of their behavior to be menacing, most scholars have assumed that the level of force employed in the suppression of the women’s activities greatly exceeded the actual threat posed by their movement. Interestingly, this historical judgment follows the contemporary discourse of the women themselves, who asserted in their testimony before the Aba Commission of Inquiry that they had done nothing to legitimize such a fierce and callous response. As one woman described the scene at Opobo, “we were fired at mercilessly.” If the reaction of the British colonial and
military officers appeared excessively violent, which even the Aba Commission conceded with regard to two of the shootings, then how are we to explain this? Some scholars have simply dismissed the British actions as yet another instance of the violence that has attended colonialism since the Spanish first set foot in the Americas. They were that, to be sure, but we believe that a fuller understanding of how the “tensions of empire” played out require us to acknowledge that colonial violence also has a history, that it needs to be contextualized and analyzed. We need a nuanced understanding of what informed the decision-making of these men and their European colleagues on the ground.

With the arrival of the so-called “new imperial history,” a concerted effort to integrate the domestic and imperial components of British history has drawn attention to the ways in which the empire came “home” to and shaped the development of the British isles. We now have studies demonstrating how colonial and formerly-colonial peoples in the metropole effected areas such as domestic spacial arrangements, racial policies, legislation, and political and social formations. Yet despite greater recognition of the imperial aspects of British society and culture, much of this recent scholarship has continued to focus predominately on metropolitan Britain and, in terms of period, on the nineteenth century. Until recently the interwar years, by comparison, have constituted “a period in British imperial history that remains curiously neglected.”

The British empire reached its zenith in terms of geographical scope between the wars. Like their French counterparts, the British acquired new territorial holdings at the end of World War I through the implementation of the League of Nations mandates system. These included the formerly Ottoman territories of Mesopotamia, Palestine, and Transjordan, which the British had occupied during the war, as well as former German holdings in the Cameroons and East Africa. At the same time, however, the empire faced new challenges in the wake of the Great War. Politicians and officials searched for new benefits from the colonies for the weakened metropolitan economy even as the former white settler colonies of the Commonwealth like Canada, Australia, and New Zealand sought to redefine their relationship with Britain. As an eventual British withdrawal came to be seen more and more as inevitable, Africa increasingly became the focus of imperial initiatives and debates over the substance of colonial governance. New or in some cases resumed expressions of anticolonial sentiment threatened British hegemony in Ireland, India, and the so-called tropical empire in Africa and the Caribbean, and the immediate postwar moment witnessed an escalation in colonial violence that in some ways continued throughout the interwar period. At the same time, the growing number of non-white migrants to Britain from the colonies helped to increase scrutiny of colonial governance and raised the tenor of anticolonial protest at the heart of the empire. Gendered and racial violence gripped metropolitan Britain as well at the end of the war. In 1919, “race riots” erupted in nine British cities, primarily in major ports like Liverpool, Cardiff, South Shields, and London, where black seamen had lived and established interracial families for quite some time. Although scholars disagree on the extent to which these pogroms were racially-inspired, in the Liverpool riots of June 1919 and elsewhere, crowds of white rioters targeted the mixed-race communities of the docklands, looting and terrorizing the homes of black Britons, a category that included not only Africans and Afro-Caribbeans but also Asians and Arabs. The government’s response in the form of Coloured and Alien Seamen Order of 1925 and the Special Certificate of Nationality and Identity Act of 1932 effectively institutionalized a color bar in the British shipping industry. Jon Lawrence has argued that both the postwar fears regarding the Great War’s brutalizing effects on Britain and the extent of riotous behavior in 1918–1919 have been overstated, but, as Kent has observed, “the wildly disproportionate response of Britons and the British government suggests that motives of a deeply psychological nature underlay the violence on the part of whites and the measures taken to remove blacks from British society.”

Though rarely cited alongside the more well-known examples of the Black and Tans in Ireland, the massacre at Amritsar in the Punjab, and the 1919 riots in
Britain, we read the British response to the Women’s War of 1929 as continuation of the pattern of colonial violence during the immediate postwar years and another expression of the interwar preoccupation with the maintenance of proper gender and racial boundaries.

While it has become common for historians to note the interconnection or “mutual constitution” of the histories of domestic Britain and its empire, of metropolitan and colonial cultures, it is often unclear exactly how this took place in practice. To upset the traditional focus on the metropole and its relations with the colonies, the vertical ties linking “core” and “periphery,” Tony Ballantyne, Alison Games, Alan Lester, Thomas Metcalf, and others have stressed the importance of connections between colonies and urged a re-conceptualization of empire in terms of overlapping “networks” and “webs of trade, knowledge, migration, military power and political intervention.”

Colonial personnel, the shock troops and petit bureaucrats of the colonial state on the ground, represented one such web of networks. “Since most governors dwelt in multiple colonies during their careers,” Lambert and Lester have observed, “so they inevitably made comparisons and connections between those colonies. Colonial governance was thus often a relative and comparative endeavour—one that was dependent on fruitfully imagining the lessons that could be learned and transferred between differently constituted colonial places.” The British imperial outlook came aground in the colony of Nigeria through endeavors of European missionaries and merchants, but, above all, the agency of a relatively small number of male colonial officials. Common images of the region’s inhabitants and Africans in general circulating within British culture informed colonial and military officers’ thought and actions during the Women’s War, and helped them to make sense of their experiences in its aftermath. But these men were also products of personal trajectories that for most entailed military combat in the Great War, either on the western front in Europe or in the colonies, and/or postings at other hot spots in the empire before they landed in southern Nigeria. These previous experiences weighed heavily on their apprehension of and response to the women’s actions in the Ogu. As Lambert and Lester put it, their lives “were part of the constant process of the making and breaking of links which made places, and those links and places were in turn ‘an element in the constitution’ of these figures’ own subjectivities.” “As they ‘careered’ across the empire and beyond,” colonial officials were also “involved in the introduction of certain modes of gendered, raced, and classed thought to new contexts.”

British imperial culture, the collective traumas of the First World War and its immediate aftermath, and the personal histories of those responsible for the suppression of the Women’s War are all elements of the context in which we interpret the events of late 1929 in southern Nigeria and their effects.

Like Priya Satia in Spies in Arabia, we read the accounts of British officials with the assumption “that their language emerges out of a particular cultural formation, for such documents are, in the last analysis, written by individuals shaped by a particular set of ideas and cultural concepts, a mentalité.” British colonial officials perceived and described the participants of the Ogu Umunwaanyi as a riotous looting mob, as violent crowds of drunken prostitutes, as “enormous” or old naked women, and, above all, as a swarming, chaotic mass of “savage” women looking to tear men “in pieces.” The consistency of their descriptions of naked women intent upon overwhelming their defenses reveals “a recurrent turn of mind,” as Neil Hertz has put it. The tendency to refer to the women’s uncovered genitalia to represent their threat to the social and political order, or, perhaps more accurately, to conflate the political and social with the sexual, characterizes the narratives, reports, and testimony of colonial officials concerning the Women’s War of 1929.

Ideas about and understandings of gender on the part of all the actors in the Women’s War were incommensurate on several levels. At certain moments in certain situations, certain actors transcended the confines of their respective worldviews, but for the most part British and indigenous West African peoples found themselves talking across a chasm of misrecognition. A historical ethnography of both the
colonized and the colonizers reminds us that gender is not universal, natural, or static, but articulates meaning systems particular to each. Western concepts of gender map onto sexual difference and assume a whole host of binaries, especially that of a public/private split for men and women; they often present relations between men and women as a battlefield from which one gender must necessarily emerge victorious, and regard victory in terms of privileges associated with masculinity in European and North American society. These binary constructions have distorted our understanding of the women’s actions. Because westerners have difficulty accepting what appear to be contradictions in the lives of southeastern Nigerian women, the filter of western gender obscures our appreciation that they could be completely at home in their personae as women traders and the guardians of the good of the land as well as in their personae as daughters, wives, and mothers. Not thinking of themselves as oppressed or kept in what used to be called “the domestic sphere”—like their female counterparts in western societies even in quite recent history—these women could be secure enough in their own sense of importance and worth to take an active part in social transformation, to try to effect change, and even to see advantages for themselves in change that was properly regulated (by them). We are not trying here to argue that African women enjoyed “liberation” before western women ever dreamed of such a state. Rather, we assert that early colonial Igbo and other southeastern women’s lives were more complex and interesting than western notions of gender allow.

British actions that led to the outbreak of the Women’s War in 1929 and the reactions of colonial officials to the disturbances derived from a worldview in which gender played out in an entirely different framework. Like virtually all stories westerners told themselves about the way the world worked, the British imaginary about Africa depended upon the creation of distinct binary opposites for its structure and comprehension: of civilization versus “the wilds,” of morality versus savagery, of reason versus superstition, of north versus south, and of order versus chaos. In each instance, gender often served to represent these binaries, sexuality to articulate their manifestations. Such a Manichean meaning system based on gender and sexuality, confronting the cosmologies of West African peoples, informed by their own understandings of gender and sexuality, set the stage for the conflict that erupted at the end of 1929. For by that time, the meanings attached to gender by the British in the purportedly all-male world of the colonial state of Nigeria ascribed to the southern provinces a “messiness” associated with femininity that had attained dangerous proportions.

The British arrived in Nigeria in the late nineteenth century with a number of preconceptions about Africa and African peoples. Their beliefs drew upon medieval and Renaissance understandings of race as a contrast of darkness and light, which in turn connoted good and evil. Long before the English laid eyes on peoples whose skins were dark, they utilized terms of black and white that carried deep and portentous meanings for them: “black” signified such negative things as death, evil, sin, and danger, while “white” stood for purity, innocence, goodness, and beauty. Because purity, innocence, and beauty were qualities often represented by women or, indeed, by women’s noticeable lack of them, the use of blackness to characterize subordinated peoples contained a gendered and sexualized component right from the start. In fact, the earliest travel writings about Africa drew upon notions of gender, specifically those having to do with sexual chaos or disorder, rather than race, to convey the sense of difference and alterity experienced by European explorers as they came in contact with African societies for the first time in the fifteenth century. Blackness, in these early narratives, appears to be merely a physical curiosity for Europeans, but gradually, as it became increasingly enmeshed with the familiar yet still threatening signs of gender disorderliness, blackness began to stand in for the idea that difference, strangeness, diversity, or disorder could be construed as destructive to or harmful of the European social and cultural practices that constituted “civilization.”

Africa and Africans, in the minds of the British, came to signify unalterable, fundamental difference
from European social and gender roles, European morals, mores, customs, values, and traditions; these differences were usually expressed by means of a disordered gender system and promiscuous sexuality attributed to Africans, and especially to African women, by writers and explorers. These kinds of descriptions reduced Africans and African societies to the level of primitive savagery, a state of being that excused British involvement in the slave trade on the grounds that Africans could hardly be counted as human. When the British outlawed the slave trade in 1807 and then slavery itself in British territories in 1833, these same depictions of Africans as bestial were drawn upon to justify later nineteenth- and twentieth-century British efforts to subdue and control the peoples of Africa by an imperial rule that promised to raise them up to “civilized” status.

The colonial encounter generated borrowings and adaptations of aspects of each gendered worldview, but they also produced a continuous series of misrecognition of actions and intentions. Southeastern Nigerian women assumed that British officials would comprehend their actions and acknowledge that their grievances were readily apparent and just. The British lacked the conceptual apparatus to recognize the women’s behavior as an explicitly gendered, political performance. Failure to do so culminated in profound acts of violence. Our book seeks to bring together the actions and thinking of the women of the Ogu and those of the British officers and colonial officials involved in the events of 1929, while also describing and explaining how southeastern Nigerian women and Britons believed the world worked, and how gender operated within their respective worldviews. It is only by appreciating how their differing worldviews animated the actors’ clashes with one another that we can fully grasp the meaning of the Ogu within the context of the British colonial and the indigenous imaginations.

The Women’s War of 1929 follows a chronological course: in the first two chapters, we lay out in their own terms the competing worldviews of the protagonists from roughly the late nineteenth century up to what we consider to be a decisive rupture in their respective meaning systems by the Great War, treated in Chapter 3. Though Nigerian people saw little in the way of actual fighting, they suffered profound social and economic distress as a consequence of labor shortages, food shortages, agricultural disruption, and, most terribly, the influenza epidemic. For the British the horrors of the war ushered in a new form of subjectivity that charged the actions of the women with a degree of intensity and danger they could not tolerate. Chapter 4 examines a mid-1920s movement called the Nwaobiala, a manifestation of the troubles thrown up by the colonial encounter and exacerbated by the war and the flu epidemic, which prefigured the Women’s War. For the British failure to recognize the Nwaobiala for what it was—a serious attempt to redress colonial abuses and re-right the world—compelled the women of the southeast to take the unprecedented actions of 1929. We then describe the events of late 1929 through the narratives generated by different participants in Chapters 5, 6, and 7, attempting to understand the reasons people saw what they saw, did what they did, and ultimately told what they told. Chapter 5 considers southeastern Nigerian women’s understanding of the egwu of 1929 and the ways in which they mobilized elements of an existing cosmology to represent and resist a growing assault on their collective interests. Since no one interviewed any of the participants during the Ogu, and because the structure and procedures of the Aba Commission circumscribed their testimony in a number of ways, we can begin to develop a feel for women’s constructions of how and why they “made demonstration” in November and December of 1929 only by patching together a variety of sources—all of which have a distinctly gendered and often a more hidden, distinctly cultural, component. Chapter 6 and 7 take up the British response to the Women’s War: Chapter 6 traces the British suppression of the Ogu, while Chapter 7 offers a close reading of how colonial officials on the scene perceived and reacted (often violently) to the movement. In Chapter 8 we discuss the public and political response in Britain and the Nigeria colony, examining the administrative changes brought about by the challenge constituted by the Ogu that resulted in what amounted to the establishment of a new imperial paradigm. In the Conclusion we also assess the legacy of the Women’s War for southeastern Nigeria.
This book constitutes a collaboration not just of individuals but of disciplines as well. Our interdisciplinarity enables us to appreciate aspects of the Women’s War that we would otherwise be unable to access and to correct the shortcomings that our disciplinary boundaries have imposed on us. As Stephan Miescher, Takyiwaa Manuh, and Catherine Cole have argued, “even as respective disciplines have each contributed to the emerging field of gender studies in Africa, each has biases and omissions that become apparent only when work in one field is juxtaposed with alternative approaches.” This book proceeds from an unabashedly feminist point of departure that is inherently interdisciplinary. What we learned from one another immeasurably enhanced our ability to understand the incredible richness of this event.

At the same time, our interdisciplinarity inevitably created some difficulty for us and for readers. Each of us approaches the material with differing styles of writing, and our respective disciplines have in addition instilled in us methodologies that compel us to present our material in different ways, try though we might to transcend old disciplinary habits. We speak, in other words, in different registers, not unlike our subjects. Narrative mixes, sometimes uneasily, with analysis. We also assert, however, that the extraordinary nature of the Women’s War commands a narrative approach if we are to do justice to its drama and significance for all parties involved in it, including ourselves and the readers of this text.
Pre- and Early Colonial Igbo Worlds

Igbo interactions with Europeans, 1850s–1920s

The Igbo-speaking people of southeastern Nigeria have inhabited, for perhaps four thousand years, the territory situated between the Niger and Cross rivers of West Africa, just north and somewhat east of the Niger Delta. For centuries, it appears that they lived self-sufficiently although not in isolation, producing their own food, textiles, and iron goods, and importing only salt and fish from Delta traders and more luxurious items like copper and beads from more distant locales. With the arrival of European mercantilists in the Delta region in the fifteenth century, Igbo traders acted as middlemen in the slave trade, exchanging slaves for local currency (such iron rods and, later, cowrie shells) and sometimes whiskey with Delta slavers, who themselves exchanged their human cargo for European-manufactured products such as textiles and armaments. The Delta towns of Bonny and Calabar became bustling centers of commerce in human beings, many of them being what we would today call Igbo.

In the years from 1730 to 1810, Igbo speakers provided the majority of slaves to the New World, a situation that rebounded harshly upon the people of the region. (One eighteenth-century British slave trader estimated that in the years 1786–1800, some 20,000 slaves per year were sold in Bonny, 16,000 of them Igbo.) Men in the prime of their lives were kidnapped by neighboring villages for sale to the coastal traders, leaving their own villages bereft of the labor, skills, and offspring they might have provided. An emerging but generally more localized trade in women also began to be a part of the increasingly precarious life of Igbo speakers, particularly during the nineteenth century. The depredation, endemic corruption, and local warfare that accompanied the slave trade had a profound destabilizing effect on all the Igbo-speaking groups in the hinterlands in this period.

When the British outlawed the traffic in slaves in 1807, Igbo traders became increasing involved in the exchange of raw materials with the traders of the Delta coast. Palm products in particular took on increased significance after 1830, when Europeans ventured up the Niger river, encountering Igbo traders directly and exchanging manufactured goods for the oil that lubricated much of Britain’s newly-developing industrial economy and for the kernels that could be made into valuable commodities like soap, margarine, and cattle fodder. One company under the leadership of George Goldie was granted a charter by British authorities in 1886 to govern the territory already under the sway of what became his Royal Niger Company. With no serious competition, Goldie could name the price he paid for oil and kernels and purchase it with “cheques” payable for goods available only in his stores. The quality of textiles the British offered in return for palm products gave little satisfaction; the guns they provided sometimes blew up in the hands of their buyers. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, alcohol had found the greatest favor with Igbo traders, constituting up to 90% of imports and providing the vast bulk of customs revenue.

The growth of western commercial enterprise along the Niger was soon accompanied by the incursion
and spread of Christianity. In 1857, the Church Missionary Society (CMS) founded its first mission at Onitsha; from there, mission posts spread both east and (briefly) west into the Igbo interior. These early Anglican missionaries hailed mostly from Sierra Leone, and some of these men were repatriated slaves who had come originally from Igboland. Their shared cultural heritage recommended the fledgling missionaries at first to a few potential converts but only marginally lessened the sense of strangeness of the new religion.¹ It would not be until the beginning of the twentieth century that the CMS could engage in a truly successful program of missionization—by which time the Sierra Leoneans had been replaced by British missionaries and the CMS found itself in strong competition with its European, Catholic counterparts as well as Protestants of many stripes, including members of the burgeoning indigenous churches.²

Igbo worldviews and Igbo worlds

Pre- and early colonial Igbo-speaking peoples possessed a highly developed religious cosmology rooted in their historical experience of the material world as well as in their many moral precepts and understandings of “the sacred.” A first and important Igbo cosmological concept—one that remained elusive for the British in their interaction with Igbo-speakers—concerned the continuity and contiguity of all parts of the cosmos. The “great spirit” Chukwu, the living, and the dead intermingled and existed in the same conceptual space, even while they all inhabited special spheres. Although Igbo-speakers regarded Chukwu and Ala/Ani, the land, as being prior and therefore senior to humanity, humanity partook of both spiritual forces. During conception, for instance, Chukwu “furnishes part of his own substance, ‘chi’, to the human child.”³ Every human being, then, contained a part of Chukwu, while also being given a physical body by his or her parents. The form (onunu) of each child, however, derived from Ala, the land, and the body, upon death, returned to the land for that form’s dissolution. The ancestors, both paternal and maternal, held a stake in the child through the Igbo concept of reincarnation. Any ancestor—and, indeed, though more rarely, people from outside the kin group—might manifest himself or herself in any child. Men could therefore be reincarnated as females, women as males. Following recent scholarship on the ambiguity of African gender systems,⁴ it is clear that Igbo-speakers who could reincarnate in a variety of genders and even as non-human beings operated within a somewhat different gender ideology. The key to a successful life, however, involved taking on the responsibilities of one’s current gender status in a mature and committed manner. Being successful, in gendered as well as other social terms, entailed being “useful.”⁵

Only such “useless” people (aghala) as the infertile, twins and the mothers of twins, and people who become involved in ulu-ani (the defilement of the land) abdicated the opportunity to be reincarnated. Every Igbo person thus wished to be useful so as to take an honorable place among the ndichie, the ancestors, and to be allowed to return among the living when she was willing. Igbo concepts of the cosmos, then, suggest that all worlds (uwa) impinged upon one another. People were not spirits (ndi mmuo), but they contained spirit (chi). The living (ndi mmadu) were not ndichie, but would hopefully attain that state. The living might quite possibly be reincarnated ndichie—which is to say that both the living and the ancestors hailed from uwa mmadu, the realm of human beings.

Although the Igbo recognized the individual and what contemporary theorists would call her agency as being important (note, for instance, that every person has her own personal chi, which directs her fortunes in the world of the living), that individual person was most socially important insofar as her attainments benefited some larger group. Whether the group constituted the individual’s kin group—in its extension to both the living and the dead—or his or her village, Igbo beliefs recognized that every person’s achievement had the potential to benefit everyone else. Collective action provided, or should have
provided, the means by which people “got up” or helped their village or market to “get up.” A woman going to market, for instance, depended upon the market wishes of her children to help her sell her goods; a young man involved in studying at a university depended upon the financial and moral support of his entire village. The children of the woman trader expected, rightly, to benefit from their mother’s success, as she was often the person who paid their school fees and fed them. The village expected both tangible rewards—in the form of a sharing of the benefits given to the educated elite—and less apparent ones—in the form of prestige and village honor. When a man or a woman took a title under the indigenous system of socially confirmed offices, his or her elevation conferred higher position on the kin group and village as well. As Igbo say in a much-quoted proverb, “the people own the king.”

This ethic of mutual benefit applied also to gender relations across southeastern Nigeria, but particularly among Igbo-speakers. Although wives were said to be “owned” by their husbands, and their children belonged to the man’s patriline, women tended to operate in a fairly independent manner. Every pre-colonial Igbo wife, for example, was supposed to have her own house within the husband’s compound and was responsible mainly to herself for her comings and goings outside the compound walls. In addition to sexual service, wives in the pre- and early colonial period owed their husbands meals—which every wife cooked and presented for the husband to taste, he deciding which wife’s meal he would actually consume. Men were obligated to provide their wives with yams to cook and clothes to wear: “It is the husband’s duty to provide the staple crops—yams, maize, beans—and the wife’s duty to provide the ingredients for soup, condiments, water and fuel, and to see that the cooking is properly done.” Beyond these basics, women had to fend for themselves—and usually did so quite capably.

Pre-colonial women’s marketing activities played an important role in this respect. Some women who lived under the stigma of barrenness used their marketing abilities to make a place of honor for themselves in their husbands’ households. According to the Hendersons, writing about women in Onitsha during the early 1960s, “the woman who has no children can build a position of status only by trading—there is no other legitimate route.” Another major area of mutual benefit for husbands and wives lay in the processing of palm fruits into oil. Men harvested the palm fruits, it being nso (an abomination) in some parts of Igboland for women to climb trees, and women and their children processed the fibers from the fruit into oil. This oil belonged to the men, but women retained control over the kernels—a significant fact in that it was the slump in the price of palm kernels and oil brought about by the worldwide depression that helped to contribute to Igbo women’s “annoyance” over their situation during the period of the Ogu Umunwaanyi.

Pre-colonial Igbo worldviews involved, then, a series of systems of mutual interdependence. Even conception required an effort of mutual cooperation—not just between men and women, but between the human world and the spirit world and even between the living and the dead. The absence of consent on the part of any party “renders conception impossible.” Chukwu gave the person his or her spirit; Ala/Ani gave the person his or her form; one of the dead had to be willing to be reincarnated (iluo uwa), and a couple had to come together sexually to make the physical stuff of human bodies. Pre-colonial Igbo people expected to find this mutual interdependence in virtually every realm of life: in the political arena, in their ultimate control over anyone they chose to put into office, for example, and in their domestic affairs, where the mundane practice of activities like cooking carried significant symbolic valence. Men supplied basic and highly valued foodstuffs, but women controlled their preparation and gave food savor through their use of condiments and extra vegetables from “women’s crops.” Just as no pounded yam, a great favorite among the Igbo, could be prepared without male input (i.e. the yam itself), the starch staple would not be good to eat without women’s laborious pounding and the pepper sauce they created to pour over it.
When every individual contributed—and that included the expressly gendered deities Chukwu and Ala/Ani—the whole benefited. Problems occurred when any one element of a partnership tried to benefit more than the other parts, or, as the Igbo proverb has it, “Mmadu bu nso ala” (“human beings spoil the land”). In such cases, the balance had to be restored, as the withdrawal of any party from these systems of interdependence endangered all other partners and all other systems. An abomination to the land affected the fertility of humans and crops because Ala then had reason to withdraw from the cause of the abomination (that is, from all humans). This, in turn, affected human interaction because people withdrew from each other if they were seen as somehow sterile or the cause of alulu ani (the act of causing abomination). The ndichie withdrew from the unharmonious human community of the living and were affected by Ala’s withdrawal, as she was their “mother” just as she was the “mother” of the living, and she included in her cosmographic domains the land of the dead.

At the most extreme end of the dissolution of social ties, chaos reigned, and even Chukwu might withdraw, leaving only his servant, death, in his wake. Chukwu took no interest in humans who took no interest in themselves, just as the “chi does not help an individual who fails to help himself,” as Igbo thinking had it. The withdrawal of Chukwu constituted the ultimate danger in Igbo cosmological thought, because his withdrawal must signify the withdrawal of his substance, the chi that gave life to every individual: “The chi leaves the man at death—in fact, its leaving is death, because the chi is likened to the breath of life.” Cosmological systems of mutual interdependence and the relations between those systems in the pre-colonial Nigerian southeast had to be maintained. Without the interplay of worlds, the entire Igbo cosmos might collapse and all human beings would die, becoming like those barren or abominated people denied existence in the land of the dead and subsequent re-entry into the land of the living. Such an eventuality was understood to be what westerners might call catastrophically traumatic, as its effects would be lasting and non-recuperative.

Gradual change, carefully managed, could be encompassed within pre-colonial Igbo societies, so long as all parties maintained basic mutualities. Igbo cosmological systems welcomed change, albeit in small doses. “Tomorrow is pregnant,” goes yet another familiar Igbo proverb, “no one knows what it will bear.” Igbo-speakers in the pre-colonial period were (and still are) expected to prepare for the results of an ambiguous and potentially dangerous future. If it became apparent that some change had occurred too quickly for the system to handle it, Igbo people possessed mechanisms with which to correct severe imbalances. Margaret Green, a colonial ethnographer brought to Nigeria to investigate what led to the events of the Ogu Umunwaanyi, recounted a story of harsh action taken by the women of the eleven villages of the Agbaja area during such an imbalance. In the 1910s, believing that men were stealing their domestic animals and observing an increase in female mortality, women

left their husbands’ villages and went either to Umunumu or to Orie Ekpa [markets] taking their mats with them so they could sleep where they were. They stayed away a month. When their husbands went to ask the reason for their withdrawal they said that too many women were dying. Either they would die when they were pregnant or when they were in childbirth, or if a man passed behind their backs when they were pregnant they would miscarry. In the old days it was not like this. But nowadays men were going to places like Onitsha and elsewhere and were bringing back bad medicine and were killing the women.

The absence of the women forced the men to cook for themselves and even, in order to placate their angry wives, to prepare large amounts of food that were carried by deputations of ten women to the places where the Agbaja women were encamped. Eventually the village elders went to consult the women and reached a solution that pleased the disgruntled parties. All “the men of Agbaja should come to Orie Ekpa and swear for the women on Ala—the earth—and the elders said that anyone failing to come would be killed.” The women compelled the men to swear that they had killed no one and had not stolen women’s animals, upon pain of their own death. When the influenza pandemic of 1918–1919 spread through Agbaja, killing many, the power of the women’s organization and their oath, according to Green, deeply
impressed the men. The arrival of the CMS Mission to Agbaja seems to have discouraged a repeat of the ceremony, but Green noted that “it could be revived at any time if need arose.”

Radical shifts within the Igbo cosmological system might prove not simply dangerous to the humans involved but even deadly. A period of profound transformation—in the case above, for instance, where men were thought to be killing pregnant women instead of recognizing their usefulness and social importance—necessitated that radical action follow if the problem were to be corrected and the necessary balance of the cosmos restored. If men had transgressed—and particularly if they had offended Ala, the female cosmological principle—it fell to women to demand redress for their crimes. Every party, after all, had the responsibility to ensure the right behavior of the other parties in such a system of mutual interdependence. Deeply disruptive social changes following in the wake of British colonial occupation, missionization, and the effects of global conflict would dramatically upset the delicate balance of pre-colonial Igbo and other southeastern cosmological constructions, as we will see below, and colonized women’s gendered responsibilities to stabilize their world would soon be called upon, as they had been in Agbaja during the early decades of the twentieth century.

**Gendered spaces: Afia (marketplace) and Ezi (compound)**

The importance of the marketplace (*afia*) in pre- and early colonial Igbo women’s lives cannot be overemphasized. More than merely a space for trading, the *afia* served as a central clearinghouse for information, much of it pertaining to women’s affairs; the focal point for women’s ritual activities; and the area where women spent much of their time. The marketplace, in many ways, represented women’s share of a gendered system of mutual interdependence in this region. As such, the welfare of the market and of market relations was deeply intertwined with the welfare of Igbo and other southeastern Nigerian women as a whole. Any threat to the market or to women’s control over the marketplace could be seen as a threat to the health and wellbeing (*mm*/*mma*) of women. By extension, a threat to markets and to stable market relations among traders (*ndi afia*) had the potential to trigger a more general collapse of Igbo societies.

In nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Igboland, women traders, most of whom were involved in “petty trading,” dominated the marketplace. Such women engaged in the small-scale trade of surplus farm goods or minor luxury items like twists of tobacco or locally manufactured liquor. Almost every woman—from the wives of very wealthy men, who might become involved in the sale of newly imported luxury commodities, like East Indian cloth or gin, to poor widows with some extra cassava from their farms to sell—traded to some extent. At the local market on market day, an Igbo village woman was likely to see every one of her female neighbors, unless one was ill, traveling, or nursing a child. At a more famous, larger market, women from all around the immediate area would attend. Isichei’s description of the Igbo market system provided a good sense of its centrality to people’s lives during this period:

> The Igbo market is an institution that marries the dimensions of space and time. Its name combines a place and a day—such as Eke-Agbaja or Afo-Umuduru—and Igboland was covered with a network of markets, carefully arranged in space and time, to avoid overlap. Since the four days of Igbo week were insufficient to accommodate them, they were fitted into an eight day cycle, *izu ukwu*, the big week.  

The marketplace thus constituted an open, female-dominated space where all transactions took place publicly and within the Igbo ethos of transparency. Women expected to bargain in the Igbo *afia*: agreements among the women traders themselves fixed prices, but no price was so fixed that a woman with the necessary verbal skills could not persuade a trader to change it slightly, and good bargainers enjoyed the admiration of everyone in the *afia*. Women circulated freely throughout the marketplace, buying, selling, or just talking together, usually leaving their children in the care of older girls and boys in the family compound. Basden’s early description of the Igbo market, however, suggested how difficult it
was for British men of the early twentieth century to comprehend the underlying orderliness and purpose of such a fluid spatial and economic arrangement, mistaking the dynamics of the women’s transactions for turmoil and disarray: “As the market fills, it becomes a veritable pandemonium. It gives the impression that no business could possibly be conducted in the midst of such chaotic confusion. The haggling over prices, the shouting, the hurling of epithets, the incessant chattering of tongues creates a din that can often be heard a mile away.”

Part of the problem for the colonials and missionaries might have been that few male voices contributed to the “veritable pandemonium” of early colonial afia. Men might assist in preparing goods for market and might even help their female kin or wives carry loads there, but they rarely spent any time in the marketplace itself, at least during a typical market day. For a man to be seen buying in the market during this period was, according to Basden, “almost a certain indication that he [was] either a stranger or a man with no womenfolk to act for him.” While women attended the market, men were supposed to be tending their farms, harvesting their yams or their palm orchards for fruit or sap, lounging in their own or their male friends’ compounds, or engaging in the work of village politics, which might also involve lounging but certainly involved oratory and the consumption of kola nuts, alligator pepper, and, at the very least, strong palm wine to aid in the formulation of masculine consensus.

If the afia comprised the heart of Igbo femaleness, serving as the center of women’s activities, the male-dominated compound (ezi) stood in direct contrast to that female-oriented space. Where the marketplace was open, public, heterarchical, and freeform in its arrangement, the compound was enclosed in walls, and its internal arrangement was hierarchical and well-defined. The compound owner’s personal house stood in the center of the compound area or against the back wall; grouped around it were the houses of each of the man’s wives. Unlike the marketplace, which could be approached from all sides and where movement was intentionally unrestricted, the prototypical compound’s wall was breached by only one door, clearly visible to the occupant of the man’s house, and from this opening alone people entered and exited. Just as the marketplace was public, open, and “transparent” to all, a place of compromise and negotiation, the compound was private, enclosed, and “transparent” only within the range of the owner’s (di, also the word for husband) sight. Within the ezi, the owner’s authority was recognized by all inhabitants, notably the wives, their children, and other, junior family members. As Njaka pointed out, “the only place a man may have authority is within his family. That is why there is an expression, ‘the owner or husband of a house’…What an individual can have in public is influence, which he can earn only through achievements.” Since most Igbo-speaking women married out of their fathers’ compounds and could not build ezi of their own, their avenues to power must necessarily have come through their influence in the public sphere of the afia. The marketplace served as an outlet during this period for women’s political expression and the arena in which female collective action was most readily organized.

Within the patrilineal compound, co-wives were expected to cooperate and render aid to each other. The hierarchical nature of Igbo domestic life, however, which required that every wife and her uterine household compete sub rosa for the favor of the husband, militated against the realization of this ideal. This competition was somewhat diffused by the women’s duty to support their children through their own farming and market activities, as well as by the expressed marital ethos of co-wife cooperation. Within the marketplace itself, competition was valorized and made explicit. The ideal typical market, unlike the ideal typical compound, thrived on a constant flow of good-natured competitiveness. Whereas the wife had to cook and make herself attractive mainly for her husband while enclosed in the private walls of the man’s ezi, her abilities, assertiveness and attractiveness served to draw many people to her “pitch” in the public space of the afia. Arguably, the more attractive and able wives a man might possess in his compound, the greater the risk of intra-household strife, but the greater the number of women with the
quality of mma (goodness, beauty, wellbeing) in the marketplace, the more prosperity (another definition of mma) a village might expect. The qualities of good wives and good traders were not completely antithetical, but they did require women to compartmentalize and to maintain a balance between aspects of their personalities in order to move smoothly between what westerners regard as private and public roles.24

Market prohibitions, such as those recorded by Okonjo among the western Igbo, carried weight; “violations of them could result in consistently poor market attendance, unfriendliness on the part of neighboring towns, epidemics and death.”25 Where women did not keep themselves and their market in a state of mma, the relations between people attending the markets (mostly women), villages in the area (people of all genders), and the general welfare of everyone involved were threatened. Men and women were responsible for the maintenance of the “market peace,” a duty owed to the market deity, who seems to have been identified with the local earth deity,26 and who became angered by the presence of troublemakers and thieves in her special domain. Only villages involved in heated conflict would dare to try to disrupt each other’s market—except in such minor ways as sending rain to discourage attendance—thus breaking the peace, because the consequences of such disruptions might be far-reaching for all concerned.

When Igbo women’s market activities proceeded without interruption and market commodities flowed freely and openly, and when women enjoyed good relations with the men in their marital villages, the connection between female production and physical as well as social reproduction could remain strong. When the market was mma, people from everywhere in the vicinity would be drawn to it, strengthening inter-village ties. Moreover, relations between whole market areas (those regions held together by the izu ukwu cycle) could ultimately be maintained and made more concrete. The breaking down of segments of this system could, however, lead to disaster. The intrusion of British colonial economic policies at the beginning of the twentieth century upset the market system at its base—the very notion of a female-centered economy—and these policies had a profound effect upon the women who “made demonstration” in 1929.

The means to organize across space: Women’s associations

Although pre- and early colonial Igbo women did not, like the men, possess recognized age-grade cohorts or participate in secret societies, they arranged themselves in at least two associations of great importance to Igbo social organization as a whole, the umuada, or lineage daughters, on the one hand, and the inyemedi or ndi iyom, lineage wives, on the other.27 These two associations stood roughly in a complementary position to men’s lineage and age-grade associations, the umuada paralleling the associations of the lineage, which promoted solidarity within the kin group, and the ndi iyom standing in a somewhat more problematic relation to men’s age-grades associations that promoted generational ties cutting across kinship boundaries within a village.

Within Igbo patrilinesages, the daughters of the lineage (umuada) carried out a variety of roles designed to maintain peace among the male patrilineage members and between the wives of male lineage mates. Umuada also had the duty to purify the lineage houses so that certain ceremonies could be performed without fear of abomination. Male members of Igbo patrilineages could not be alienated from the lineage except for some great crime, or, ultimately, if they should die without issue of either sex (although the preference was generally for male children). In a similar fashion, exogamous Igbo women maintained their kin-group and village ties and generally did not surrender them in favor of those of their husbands. Members of the umuada regularly returned to their natal village to officiate at important functions, particularly funerals, where their presence was fundamentally required, and ultimately every “daughter”
returned to be buried in the area where she was born unless she was the mother of many sons—who might request that their mother be buried in the compound in which they would continue to live. Daughters of the lineage therefore enjoyed considerable mobility, and might meet up with one another wherever out-married daughters of the lineage resided. Although a “stranger” in the village of her husband, an Igbo-speaking woman maintained her ties to her natal patriline, continued to invoke her own patrilineage ancestors—even setting up a small shrine to her own chi in her husband’s compound—and met her “sisters” throughout the area.

The other important association for Igbo women in the immediate pre-colonial period, ndi iyom, comprised the wives of men living in a particular village-group. It was, one might say, a gathering of “strangers,” women who banded together in order to regulate their intra-village affairs. For although these women did not necessarily have kinship ties with each other, they did share common everyday interests. They traded in the local market together and were charged by the market deity with keeping the market clean, peaceful, and full of mma. Ndi iyom “made the rules about markets, crops and livestock that applied to men as well as to women;” they “heard complaints from wives about mistreatment by husbands, and discussed how to deal with problems they were having with ‘the men’ as a whole.” In short, this organization used its crosscutting ties as a basis for women’s village-wide authority and prestige.

In part because of their involvement in the local markets, women of ndi iyom possessed special qualifications to bring together in-married women and to mediate their disputes with each other and with their husbands. Discord among women’s households within men’s ezi could easily become discord in the marketplace, where it was, as we have previously noted, forbidden. Green’s story above provides an example of the organization women in ndi iyom might generate when faced with a situation of great male-female tension within the village, especially when that tension threatened the social order that women were responsible for upholding. While men’s secret societies and age-grades cut across patrilineage boundaries within a village, they did not gather together men with inter-village connections and give them a cause for solidarity. Ndi iyom, by contrast, had responsibilities to the market deity in their marital villages and members were at the same time obligated to uphold the earth goddess’s interests in their natal villages as representatives of the umuada. The injunction to preserve the “good of the land” thus held a great potential for organization across spatial and even what we might call ethnic boundaries for Igbo women throughout the whole of southeastern Nigeria in the early colonial period. These women operated within a widespread network created by ties in their various versions of ndi iyom and umuada, which could—women learned, at least as early as 1925—facilitate rapid, large-scale mobilization of women with common goals. Although this regional, gendered network rarely, if ever, was activated before the beginning of the twentieth century, it appears to have been recognized by Igbo-speaking women as something that existed in potentia. When the crisis of the land grew severe enough and mobilization began in earnest, they would have a name for it: umunwaanyi (the collectivity of women) or Ohandum (oha ndi iyom, the council of all wives).

While the interaction of the umuada and ndi iyom in pre-colonial times remains somewhat unclear, it seems likely that their differing interests led to a general lack of communication between the two types of associations, although not between the women who shared membership in each. With the British “pacification” of Igboland and the onset of missionization, however, their separateness may have become less pronounced. By the 1920s, the daughters and the wives of lineages all over the Igbo area seem to have grasped some commonality in the goals of their associations, particularly in this moment of crisis. The “diffused political authority” of the two associations coalesced around the moment of the Ogu Umunwaanyi, preparing the way for a mass demonstration of female solidarity cutting across lineages boundaries (like ndi iyom), while also utilizing the inter-village lines of communication built up by out-
married members of umuada. It is also entirely possible that women mobilized through other contacts made out of the ever-rotating market system imposed by the izu ukwu (market week), as well as through contacts made with the development of new (and newly-gendered) identities coming out of women’s colonial and mission encounters in the Nigerian southeast.

Although we can infer that by 1929 Igbo and other southeastern women had come to see a certain commonality to their interests, it remains unclear exactly how this solidarity came about and whether it was as monolithic as it appears from outside the Ogu. Indeed, in a precursor movement to the Ogu—the Nwaobiala of 1925, which will be discussed at length in Chapter 4—we have good evidence that women were divided along a number of lines during this period, particularly in relation to generation, status, and new religious differences. Women’s associations, women’s political activity, and the dual spatial metaphors of marketplace and compound pre-dated the disturbances of 1929; they even pre-dated the advent of European traders, Christian missions, and the detested native administration imposed by British colonialism. As we have seen, a recognized potential for resistance to male-centered power and authority existed within women’s organizations. The interplay of internal and external forces in the 1920s, however, combined to lead the women of southeastern Nigeria to assert, drastically, that “the land is changed—we are all dying” and to determine to do something about it.32

The changing land: British administrative policies and mission Christianity

The changing of the land lamented by Igbo women occurred at the hand of British colonial administrators and Christian missionaries—and, indeed, at the hands of colonized men and women who wished to be part of these new authorities in the land, the incipient comprador elites of southeastern Nigeria.33 British administration began with the appointment of Frederick Lugard, the man credited by Europeans with the creation of Nigeria itself. Lugard came to West Africa in 1894 in the employ of George Goldie, founder and director of the Royal Niger Company, after having spent a year in East Africa fighting against Arab slavers. Lugard quickly became known as an intrepid soldier whose courage and resolve had enabled him to “survive in untamed Africa.” These characteristics recommended themselves particularly to Goldie, who needed such a man in the Niger territories to protect and further the interests of his company.34

Lugard spent five years as the representative of the Royal Niger Company, bushwacking his way through “uninhabited” country to extract from local chiefs treaties that barred French commercial activities in return for the “protection” of the British company. In 1897, he founded and took command of the West African Frontier Force. In 1900, the British government replaced the Royal Niger Company as the administrative power in the northern territories, establishing a Protectorate of Northern Nigeria with Lugard at its head as high commissioner. At that time he turned his attention to the “Muhammadan Emirates” of the Niger interior, where “slave-trading was at once the most favoured pastime and the principal industry of the ruling classes.”35 By 1906, the emirs had been, in the imperial parlance of the day, “pacified,” and were settling into the process of colonization; defeated by British arms, they were to be permitted to govern their subjects under Lugard’s system of “indirect rule.”

The Lugardian doctrine of indirect rule undergirded British colonial government in this era, leaving indigenous ruling structures in place, through which the local British resident or district officer asserted British power and administered greater amounts of territory than would otherwise be possible. The doctrine had a long pedigree, and provided the basis on which British imperialists and, increasingly, the British public, had developed particular ideas about themselves “as a ruling race.”36 Developed first in the Punjab in India in the 1840s as the British sought to bring that area under control, the ideal promulgated by indirect rule portrayed British imperialists as men of such strength of character, resourcefulness, and moral certainty that tiny numbers of them could rule over millions of alien peoples
The “man on the spot,” as he became known in colonial circles, was held to exercise a “personal authority” over indigenous peoples in the newly conquered territories of India. Serving on the frontier far away from administrative centers or the metropole, unable to rely upon superiors for guidance or assistance, the man on the spot, it was believed, possessed charismatic powers. Convenient for and necessitated by a home government unwilling to provide the funding to establish greater institutional control over a sprawling empire, the creed of the Punjab transmogrified over the second half of the nineteenth century into the system of indirect rule developed by Lugard and his circle. This system was to have particular consequences for the southeastern portion of what eventually became the colony of Nigeria.

The Southern Protectorate of Nigeria came into existence in 1906 with the merger of the Niger Coast, Lagos, and Oil Rivers Protectorates, three previously distinct territories administered by both the Foreign Office and the Colonial Office. “Pacification” in much of the south had been accomplished by 1900 through a combination of treaties with the various Yoruba states, the forcible conquest of the Benin kingdom, and the domination of the trading federations in the Niger Delta. The eastern “hinterland” territories in the south proved far more resistant to British control, however; British forces undertook numerous expeditions into Igbo territory in order to subdue the Igbo peoples and gain control over the region, and could not make good their claim to exercise governmental authority there for another six years. They inflicted a degree of violence in the area that probably surpassed that of any other.

In the first two decades of the twentieth century, most southeastern Nigerian people suffered under the intensification of colonial activities within their region. Since there had been widespread, often violent, resistance to the British incursion, Igbo-speakers and other groups felt the weight of the British colonial military from the moment that the military began its campaign for “pacification” with the infamous Aro expedition of 1901–1902. Armed troops routinely swept through the villages of the southeast, looking for subversives and weapons, while taking as their due whatever foodstuffs and other goods that they could “requisition.” These same armed colonial forces considered the able-bodied young men of southeastern villages to be a readily available pool for corvée labor under the Roads and Rivers Ordinance, often sweeping up as many of a particular village’s youthful male population as they could find for use as bearers, road and trail builders, miners, and any other work that the colonial authorities deemed necessary.

Some of these young men returned to their homes, but many did not—either being absorbed into burgeoning urban locations like Onitsha or Port Harcourt, taking jobs in the dangerous coal mines of northern Nigeria, or disappearing entirely from people’s ken into an unknown and often unannounced death. When faced with such disappearances, indigenous people feared the worst. Those who disappeared in this fashion took on a peculiarly ambiguous state of being within the cultures of the Nigerian southeast: did they still exist or did they not? This lack of closure, in turn, put an untenable pressure on those people left behind, who did not know whether to expect to see their kin again or to mourn for them and repair the communal loss represented by death. For Igbo women, whose responsibilities included the care and deposition of the dead, the lack of a body to wash, dress, and depose for burial meant that the real work of mourning could not be accomplished, and the spirit of the disappeared could not be born into its next existence as an ancestor. Even those who were able to return found that their absence had caused hardship and food shortages in farming areas for women, children, and older men, since younger men ordinarily did the heavy work of yam cultivation and harvesting.

The specter of collective punishment, along with the specters of the ambiguously disappeared, continually haunted southeastern Nigerians. Men and women learned to flee their towns upon learning of the approach of colonial forces, because of the brutality that had been experienced across the region.
After the implementation of the Collective Punishment Ordinance in February of 1912, such punishments were regularized and supposedly made only after proper judicial hearings in which villagers could state their case against the punishment. In practice, however, even after the ordinance was promulgated, colonial authorities “on the spot” often went ahead and meted out rough justice—burning houses and crops, destroying shrines or other places where people might congregate, including markets, and paying little attention to any local property rights. When men (especially local elders) were accused of subversion or armed resistance against the emerging colonial regime, they could expect lengthy and physically dangerous stays in the new jails being constructed by forced labor, flogging, and even the possibility of death by hanging. As Ekechi noted, collective punishment was believed to be efficacious by the British, even as it alienated and angered rural people who might have become somewhat more cooperative with the colonial authorities if they had not been “made an example of.”

Women were sometimes flogged or otherwise physically punished by the colonial authorities during the implementation of collective punishment; however, most of their pain went unnoticed in the colonial record. Nonetheless, their kitchens—women’s most sacred and individuated spaces within men’s compounds, where they kept their cooking implements and had modest shrines for their personal spirits (chi)—were destroyed when men’s houses were demolished or burned. Their livelihoods were placed in jeopardy when their fathers, husbands, and sons were marched away to unknown destinations, leaving seed yams unplanted, the yam hills half-constructed, or the planted fields unweeded and full of tubers needing the gendered care that no woman was supposed to be able to provide. And part of what made them, in their own eyes, women—that which helped to maintain their gender ideologies and gendered identity in the changing land—was put into deep crisis when the British military forces burned and trampled the markets that were supposed to be women’s public space *par excellence*. Igbo women as wives and members of *ndi iyom*, and as daughters and members of the *umuada*, could not help but be outraged and traumatized during the decade or so of collective punishment in southern Nigeria, however little the British consciously intended to target the “weaker sex” and thought of them, if they thought of the southeastern women at all, as something along the contemporary lines of collateral damage.

In 1911, the Colonial Office asked Lugard, then serving in Hong Kong, to return to West Africa in order to consolidate the Protectorates of Northern Nigeria and Southern Nigeria into a single administrative entity under its auspices. Upon at least nominal completion of this task in 1914, Lugard was appointed the first governor of the united Colony and Protectorate of Nigeria, in which office he served until the end of the Great War. As colonial officials saw it, the process of pacification of the “Nigerian” peoples had now been concluded. What these British administrators failed to perceive—partially because women in the Nigerian southeast had not entered their field of vision as actors requiring their notice—was that the policies and practices they had imposed on the colony significantly disrupted and threatened the worldviews and quotidian lives of Igbo and other southeastern women, a significant proportion of the “pacified” population who regarded themselves as responsible for ensuring the wellbeing and continuity not only of their families but of human existence itself.

Under indirect rule, the understaffed and overwhelmed British sought to govern this region, like the northern emirates, through local rulers. “Under the false impression that eastern Nigerian communities, like some other communities elsewhere in Africa, were ruled by ‘Kings and Chiefs,’” noted A. E. Afigbo, the British appointed a “chief,” or sometimes several chiefs, for each village or group of villages as the case might be. These “chiefs” were given warrants or “certificates of recognition,” which made them the sole executive heads of their local communities and entitled them to be called from time to time to participate in the trial of cases in the “Native Courts” that were established under the system. In a number of places the men who were appointed Warrant Chiefs were the traditional ritual heads of their villages, but in the overwhelming majority of cases they were either scoundrels or just ordinary young men of no special standing in indigenous society who had been pushed forward for the specific purpose of parleying with the white man.
It is unclear for exactly how long the British remained under the mistaken impression that they were abiding by “native law and custom” by creating warrant chiefs, but Afigbo showed that the long-time administrators in the south, known as “old Nigeria hands,” were operating under few illusions as early as 1912 about the men they had set above their fellows. This year marked the advent of Lugard onto the southern Nigerian scene and the escalation of abuses under what Afigbo termed “Lugardism.” Lugard gradually transformed certain warrant chiefs into paramount chiefs, with a concomitant addition of power awarded to those fortunate chosen few. The paramount chiefs were thus meant to become “native authorities” much in the style of the northern emirs, no matter how unlikely a match were the various indigenous political systems that were to be subsumed under the new regime.47

Lugardism aggravated an already unhappy situation in the southeastern region and quickly turned it into an intolerable one. The warrant chiefs, forced to “get up” by the British, immediately perceived the advantages they could reap from their new reinforced positions of power. Money lending by the chiefs to litigants, for example, became almost endemic in the native courts, and these courts were further corrupted to enhance the chiefs’ profits. “The Warrant Chiefs who generally were unscrupulous and grasping were not averse to luring unsuspecting simple folk into bootless litigation by promising to lend them, often at exorbitant rates the money with which to pursue litigation,” noted Afigbo. “In this way the Native Court environs became a centre for nefarious money lending.”48 Since, under indirect rule, the district officer was no longer required to preside directly over the decisions of the native courts, these sorts of abuses escalated.

Reductions in the numbers of court clerks and court messengers, another part of the Lugard plan to compress the former system into something more manageable and efficient, caused those who remained to become more highly paid and infinitely more powerful than before. The court clerks—already obnoxious to the people because of their control over official documents and information relating to the newly amalgamated colony’s powerful administrators—began to further abuse the privileges accorded them by their somewhat dubious status of colonial familiarity. Afigbo recorded that some clerks began to write their own “laws” and imposed them even on the warrant chiefs themselves:

Chief James Onwunali of Ikenanzizi Otnwo, Okigwi, who himself was a Warrant Chief, told stories of how a clerk of the Obowo Native Court made a “law” that no “chief” should smoke a pipe in the court, and how one Chief Nwachukwu Nwadike when sitting as a vice-president smoked a pipe in court and was fined two pounds at the instance of the court clerk for contravening government “law.” No record of the fine was made, however.49

Court messengers were supposedly only authorized to deliver messages and to make sure of the conduct of people in the court, but they profited from the delivery of akwukwo nwannunu (which translates literally as “bird paper/book”). Isichei defined this object as “a summons as baseless as air,” even though it had all the authority of the written word to make it seem real to those served with it, who paid to have it “lost” or who otherwise paid fines or forfeited property to the native courts, just as if it somehow had the real force of law.50 As the gatekeeper, both literally and figuratively, to the native court and court clerk, the messenger also made advances in status over the warrant chief under the provisions of Lugardism. Afigbo recorded a graphic incidence of this:

A former court messenger told of an instance when as a head messenger he was approached by a chief who wanted to be taken to the court clerk. Because the chief did not come with a bottle of “English wine,” he said, “I ordered him out of my house. It was only after he had knelt down and addressed me as ‘master’ that I consented to go on the condition that the wine would be produced after.”51

Rather than administering “native law,” then, the native courts were clearly perceived by most people as instruments of oppression, an oppression that sprang up from within as much as from outside the confines of southeastern Nigeria. Village denizens knew the warrant chiefs, court clerks, and court messengers personally and became indignant at their elevation, particularly as that elevation was not seen as having
come through any known individual merit. Under the Igbo political system in place when the British arrived—"acephalous" though the colonialists may have deemed it—the taking of titles had been an organized affair involving community approval and multiple modes of reciprocity. Although some titles were, in a sense, purchased by the wealthiest townspeople, the true social significance of those titles lay in their value as tokens of community recognition. The taking of titles also ideally meant added social responsibilities for the newly titled rather than power at the expense of others.\textsuperscript{52}

With the establishment of the warrant chief system and the development of its petty hierarchies—and, at the same time, the outlawing of title societies in many parts of Igboland by both the administration and the Christian missions—the British sought to destroy the old systems of prestige and set up new ones more thoroughly under their control and part of the new rubric of indirect rule. The colonial government outlawed the taking of certain titles in 1902 because it "claimed the desire to buy titles accounted for the rampancy of theft."\textsuperscript{53} Yet other, more authentic forms of theft—notably the warrant chiefs’ refusal to pay more than £5 for bridewealth (when the going rate was rather closer to £20) or their confiscation of women’s livestock on minor pretenses—went largely unreported and certainly unpursued by the native courts.

To implement indirect rule through the system of warrant chiefs, the British turned to local, masculine institutions and authority, those being the only types the colonialists generally recognized, unless confronted with what was an obviously female ruler. Mba pointed out that there had been titled Igbo-speaking women, some quite powerful in their village-groups, but "partly as a result of their neglect by the British, the women’s titles became less meaningful, the title-holders of less account and therefore less able to attract the attention of the British."\textsuperscript{54} Women were certainly not consulted in the selection of warrant chiefs, something about which they later complained bitterly to the Aba Commission, nor were any women selected to possess warrants. Mba also noted that women were not "made members of the native courts, court clerks, interpreters, messengers or police or army recruits."\textsuperscript{55} In effect, women were denied access to every new position of power and authority in the emerging colonial society of southeastern Nigeria and were no longer even accorded the dignity of being consulted as to their opinions. Whereas before the advent of the British, women could make their interests known to the male elders through their meetings and councils, this was no longer possible under the British regime. There were no official channels of communication between southeastern women and the new authorities, and any women’s protests to (or about) the new local authorities more often than not fell on deaf ears.

Before the imposition of the native administration, the authority of local elders (the ezeala) had been recognized in the village-group, and women could approach these men with their grievances. Cases had been heard in public under the gaze of the entire community, and were therefore at least somewhat contingent on public approval. Corruption had existed, clearly, but had been mediated by public scrutiny and the cultural ethos of transparency. Most importantly, no one, neither man nor woman, could be kept from speaking out if he or she had information relevant to a case. Igbo proverbial wisdom categorically insisted that "a case forbids no one." This freedom of expression—with its emphasis on eloquence and formal modes of speech delivered at the appropriate time and in the appropriate place—had been crucial in Igbo political life since "it is talk and the response to it that measures political potency."\textsuperscript{56} In contradiction to this basic precept, warrant chiefs, taking their orders from the British colonial administration, were often forced (and sometimes took it upon themselves) to present new laws and policies to people throughout the southeast about which there could be no discussion and certainly no refusal. When district officers visited the chiefs and held meetings to explain major policy changes, women were not invited either to attend or to express their positions on the matters at hand.

This issue of where the real power lay was important; indeed, critically so, since the warrant chiefs, court messengers, and court clerks had managed to make themselves thoroughly obnoxious to the people.
through their misuse of authority. As representatives of the “white man,” these grasping, newly made elites also cast a further bad light upon the entire colonial project for those who had to suffer under both its official and unofficial abuses. One woman at the Aba Commission hearings put into succinct form the grievances universally felt about the system of indirect rule:

It is long time since the Chiefs and the people who know book… have been oppressing us. We are telling you that we have been oppressed. The new Chiefs are also receiving bribes. Since the white man came, our oil does not fetch money. Our kernels do not fetch money. If we take goats or yams to market to sell, Court messengers who wear a uniform take all these things away from us. 57

Under the warrant chief system men—and not even previously recognized male leaders—held the power to make and enforce rules pertaining to both men and women, young people, and established community elders. The warrant chiefs and the court messengers also tried to interfere in the marketplace, confiscating women’s goods and announcing market tolls and other new regulations to be imposed on the previously freewheeling afia. Such injustices turned out to be cumulative in their effects, residing long in the memories of the resentful and increasingly radicalized women of the Nigerian southeast.

Women seem mainly to have blamed the warrant chiefs for corruption and for falsely assuming the authority that belonged to the locally accredited powerful. In 1930, for instance, many women who testified before the Aba Commission requested that the British sweep away the old wrongly-chosen chiefs and be advised by them, Ohandum (the council of all women/wives), as to who should rule. But they also blamed the chiefs for privatizing justice and political discourse that should have been openly and transparently expressed. Rather than enabling discussion and public consideration for plans that affected every member of the communities over which they held authority, the warrant chiefs now delivered regulations about everything from the building of roads to the deposition of private income. These orders were captured in a written form, access to which was restricted to the very few—always closely allied to the colonial or mission presence—who could read, at least after a fashion.

No arguments could be made to the pieces of paper routinely pointed to as the true authority, and women had even less access to the district officers and assistant district officers than did men, who increasingly lost this access themselves as a result of Lugardian policies restricting the district officers’ attendance at native courts. The problem of akukwo (paper/learning/literacy) was exacerbated for southeastern women because their access to literacy was proportionally restricted—as their capacity to “learn book” was derided by both Europeans and indigenous men 58—alienating them more than ever from the new sources of power/knowledge in their milieu. This “problem of akukwo” for women was not only a problem coming out of their encounters with colonialists and colonial functionaries. The problem had its roots solidly in southeastern Nigerian women’s interactions with the Christian missionaries in their midst and in decisions taken by European missionaries, usually without the women’s input, about indigenous women’s ability and need for the emerging skills associated with “learning book.”

The spread of the missions

The rapid spread of the Christian missions throughout the whole of southeastern Nigeria after the destruction in 1902 of the “Long Ju-Ju” oracle at Aro-Chukwu introduced the second element in the formation of a climate of dissatisfaction during this period. A certain amount of missionization had already begun in the Igbo areas prior to 1902, as noted above, especially on the part of the CMS Niger Mission (some of whose churches became the Niger Delta Pastorate in 1892 during a schism over the arrival of British missionaries in Onitsha and the Delta), the Catholics (in particular, the Holy Ghost Fathers, whose headquarters were at Asaba, directly across the River Niger from Onitsha), and the Presbyterians, who set up an Igbo station as early as 1888. 59 But the destruction of the Aro-Chukwu oracle marked a definite low-point for many practitioners of Igbo indigenous religions and thus provided
an opening for Christians to take advantage. This they did with alacrity, taking in lepers; preaching that an osu (so-called sacred slave, a person dedicated to a shrine) or a former domestic slave (oru) was the equal of any free-born person (onye ala, child of the earth); calling for the destruction of the local secret societies; saving twins and the mothers of twins from death by exposure; making orthographies for the Igbo and other local languages; and setting up mission schools. As the “flocks” began to grow and transportation to the interior was made easier through the program of “pacification” being practiced by the British in the wake of the Aro-Chukwu expedition, many other evangelical denominations joined the early pioneers in an attempt to save Igbo and other southeastern souls for Christ.

The arrival of Christianity in such force made for new village factionalism and, perhaps, made old points of differentiation more concrete. At first, young men often attended mission schools under the direction of their fathers, who were looking for inside information about missionaries and their intentions. The subversive potential of missionization, however, soon became clear to at least some of these youths, and they began to use their mission education to escape the control of elders and to take advantage of the new employment opportunities springing up in the colonial administration and the native courts. For example, some Igbo boys were sent by their fathers to the mission schools to learn as much as the local court clerks and messengers, then they were supposed to help their towns (and especially their patrilineages) fight against these usurpers. Instead, the young men joined the hated and rapidly evolving colonial bureaucracy or moved to urban areas associated with the centrality of colonial control, where there was better-paid employment for the literate and modernizing youth.

Young women often joined the churches in defiance of their natal families and refused to marry the men selected for them if the potential husbands were not Christians or were polygynous. Converted wives fled from their “pagan” husbands and refused to return to them. Even some wealthy, elderly men forswore their titles, dismissed all their wives but one, and became extremely devout, shocking and outraging their community and the communities of their disgraced spouses. Many people, however, refused baptism and continued to defend the old religious beliefs, or only nominally participated in mission activity in order to take advantage of those benefits accruing to the newly Christianized. Igbo village social life—already divided by age-grades, men’s and women’s associations, title-taking, and secret societies—became further factionalized by the advent of the missions, and then splintered again under the pressure of the competitiveness of the missions themselves, which often set up stations specifically to challenge their co-religionists in larger towns like Owerri or Aba. It appears that the main area of village-wide agreement in much of the Nigerian southeast had, by the 1920s, become reduced to the general dislike of the warrant chief system and a burgeoning distrust of government intentions.

Although women, once convinced of the power of the Christian churches, flocked to the missions in great numbers, they found that the missions were by and large run by men who were more interested in their young male converts than in any female religious vocation or fervor. In accordance with the colonial administration and against the evidence of their own experience in some cases, most European missionaries believed that Igbo society was completely male-dominated. Male converts were therefore doubly precious, as is evidenced by the care and interest taken in the young men who showed an interest in the CMS mission, all of whom were seen as potential catechists or even ministers and future missionaries to the “hinterlands.” Women were not considered to be viable for such official church positions—there were no women clergy among the Anglicans, after all, nor in most of the other European and American congregations—so their power in the missions must always be bound up with their outside administrative abilities, especially their participation in women’s auxiliaries, the Catholic Mothers’ League, and the newly ubiquitous mikiri, meetings made up of Christian women who were also at least nominal members of both umuada and ndi iyom. The exclusion of women from important offices in the burgeoning mission churches directly led to their “prominent role in the establishment of the indigenous
independent churches.” These independent African churches were very important in the creation of a more radical, syncretistic religious climate in southeastern Nigeria in the years leading up to 1929.

During 1915, for example, Nigerian visionaries Garrick Braide and Moses Hart established a local evangelical sect. In the words of the Rev. R. P. Dauphin, a Seventh Day Adventist serving as a missionary in Nigeria, describing the Garrick Braide movement in a letter to the resident of Owerri:

Under the influence of the Holy Spirit, and through these spirit-filled men as the visible agents, a fresh revival wave spread through the country, and many turned from idols to serve the living God. These revivalists adopted as the Fundamental Principles of their faith, Confession, Temperance, Polygamy and Faith Healing.

In these hybrid, indigenous Christian contexts women might gain more of a leadership role, but the Garrick Braide movement was still securely under the control of men, and men, moreover, who had accepted enough of Christian teaching to be considered “revivalist” by a European member of a radical western evangelical sect. There may have been southeastern female “Garrick Braides” during this period, but we find little evidence for them at present in the historical literature. Yoruba women were known as prophets and visionaries during this period, notably the fifteen-year-old Abiodun Akinsowan, who in 1925 established the Cherubim and Seraphim section of the Apostolic church. Abiodun Akinsowan’s Cherubim and Seraphim section also operated outside of the Yoruba area during the early years of the twentieth century (as it continues to do in the twenty-first), so it is entirely possible that Igbo women were involved in it. Generally, however, Igbo and other southeastern women received less attention by the more established church hierarchies, not unlike their European female counterparts. We see this nowhere more clearly than in mission education.

The CMS and the Catholics, the two largest missions in the southeastern region of Nigeria during this period, raced against each other to develop a network of schools and technical institutes in order to bring in “young converts.” The colonial administration, while not actively hostile to the missions, regarded them as offering certain difficulties as well as opportunities for the government. Mission education helped to consolidate the missions’ position in the area, because it could be utilized to produce low-level functionaries for the government like court clerks and interpreters. Both the CMS and the Catholics strove consciously to represent themselves to the administration as the best educators of potential assistants for the colonial regime. The smaller mission churches, on the other hand, were mainly interested in bringing enough education to the people to allow them to read their bibles and thus receive personal salvation through the (vernacular) word.

Women, who were never considered for government service after the implementation of indirect rule in 1906, were not involved in the “serious” education competition being played out by the CMS and the Catholics. The establishment churches either ignored women’s education or directed it towards what was then called the “domestic sciences.” Training women in household management, child rearing, sewing, and religious work was supposed to render them more fit for the higher calling of being dutiful, Christian wives for educated, African elite men. One campaign that every mission agreed upon, and which focused upon women almost exclusively, was the desire to ensure that all women would be clothed and would therefore help to maintain “social purity” for colonized men and women alike. British CMS missionaries—perhaps more than their somewhat louche “old Nigeria hand” counterparts in the colonial service—found southeastern women’s habitual forms of undress particularly distasteful and certainly unchristian. The Rev. J. Craven R. Wilson, a CMS missionary in Onitsha, wrote about this burning issue in his Annual Letter of 1906, just as indirect rule was being consolidated:

When African children of both sexes roam about at will indoors & out-of-doors without clothing of any kind, until in some cases 18 years of age, & when Christian mothers allow the same unclothed condition to prevail among their own young ones, the innocence of infancy is lost at birth, & how is it possible for the young people to be either pure in thought or chaste in deed? When the older girls &
women are unclothed to the waist, & when even among Christian mothers an upper covering is considered a ‘fad’, rather than an act of decency, is it to be wondered at that the young men fall an easy prey to the enticements of the girls? The African Christian woman has yet to learn her responsibility in this direction, & we trust that the Missions to Women held during the year in this District & elsewhere—to be followed by a Conference of Women on Social & other subjects next year at Onitsha—may lead women to see their duty in this matter of Social Purity.69

Since indigenous women’s status was often marked in the style, variety, and amount of cloth in which they draped—or did not drape—themselves, Christian missionary obsession with full body coverage helped to further complicate women’s lives and particularly helped to undermine senior women’s authority over younger women’s sexuality and economic productivity. (We will return to this point at greater length below in Chapter 4.) Because this was such a point of pride for the missionaries during the first decade of the twentieth century, and because it appeared that Christianity had triumphed in this one area of women’s lives at least, when older women returned, as it were, to a state of nudity during the Ogu, it must have seemed to the colonialists and the most thoroughly missionized men that Christian principles were on the verge of breaking down completely.

The training in such Christian principles southeastern women received in the smaller churches was likely to be of the same ilk as that found in their larger Catholic and Anglican counterparts, with the possible addition of learning to read enough in the vernacular to be able to peruse their Igbo bibles. By the 1910s, the region witnessed the advent of a significant quantity of women missionaries, particularly among the CMS and other, larger protestant sects. These activist women missionaries, who often came to the mission field with the charge of overseeing female converts, insisted that indigenous women’s education include at least basic English and arithmetical literacy. Missionaries opened a small number of girls’ schools in southeastern Nigerian urban areas like Onitsha, and a more extensive education was now required for young women who were training to become CMS, Presbyterian, or Methodist pastors’ wives. Such an elite education was not available to the majority of southeastern Nigerian women, however, and most remained illiterate or only functionally literate—albeit fully clothed in the new “frocks” and blouses that mission Christianity had made fashionable and morally necessary. Among the non-elite in urban areas and in villages all around the region, evangelical sects attracted many women, and the mikiri, the Christian version of women’s associations, flourished near every evangelical church, particularly in smaller locales.

Some women, especially those in the growing urban areas of the Nigerian southeast, maintained their ties to the established churches and became thoroughly Christianized—the fate particularly of the wives of many of the educated Igbo men who saw Christianity as a means for establishing closer ties between themselves and the colonial administration, usually their employer. Other women remained marginally attached to the missions without being pulled completely into the Christian orbit. This issue of marginalization becomes crucial in the Ogu Umunwaanyi because, for the committed Christian southeastern woman who was never involved in polygynous marriage and was rendered less attached to the older women’s associations by her (European) faith and increasingly well-dressed, Victorian lifestyle, the idea of female solidarity might have seemed as ludicrous as the actions of British female suffragists were to many middle-class Britons. As the Ogu played itself out, there is evidence for this lack of solidarity among some urban, Christian women—but not all—and the importance of the mikiri, along with older associations, for the actual protesters cannot be over-estimated.

Conclusion

The land had changed; that much was apparent to everyone as colonialism and Christianity became endemic to the Nigerian southeast by the 1910s. While for a few elite southeasterners these changes were clearly advantageous, the majority of indigenous women and men found themselves living in a world that
must have seemed to have turned upside down in the short space of a generation. Respected male authority figures languished under the rule of both the white men and the unwelcome native administration. Collective punishment had taken a toll—in the form of repeated food levies, corvée labor, disappearances, and even public executions—on all of the inhabitants of the villages and towns of the region. Female elders were no longer consulted in matters that heretofore would have been their duty and that comprised the basis for their own power in the land. Even the principle female deity was dismissed by the new religious powers from the Christian missions and her shrines and rituals were falling into disrepute. Colonial authority was beginning to look much more like the enclosed, surveilled, and controlled compound model of men than the open, free-wheeling, transparent, and feminine *afia* that offered such an important, countervailing cultural model within Igbo and other southeastern world views. As colonialism intensified in southeastern Nigeria and as people struggled to understand their place in the emerging colonial social order, women had every reason to be the least comfortable with what they were experiencing—even though men’s discomfort was also great. For now, indigenous women continued to meet and to try to maintain their ties within and across spatial boundaries they still understood. However, a global conflagration was about to begin, and this would have consequences for all inhabitants of the Nigerian colony—including Igbo, Ibibio, Efik, Ijo, Annang, Ogoni, and Andoni women.

“Station [Aba]”. Igbo peoples, Nigeria.
The British View: The Chaotic World of Southeastern Nigeria

Igbo social, political, religious, and economic practices baffled Britons, who saw in the heterarchical nature of their institutions and systems a manifestation of chaos and disorder. Their first instinct was to contrast Igbo ways with those of northern Nigerians, using gendered language to articulate the differences and to express the shortcomings, as Britons saw them, of southeastern Nigeria. Inevitably, Igbo and other southeastern Nigerian peoples took on the trappings of a messy, alien, ultimately dangerously sexualized femininity, as distinct from the ascetic, masculine order, control, and familiarity of the north. In British accounts of the colonization of Nigeria, we find unmistakable signs of the gendered meaning systems that informed the imperial enterprise and evidence of the profound gender and sexual anxieties their interactions with colonized peoples generated.

Colonial officials and their apologists painted a picture of their world that colored their actions and justified their behavior, providing a cultural frame that enabled British officials and the British public to make sense of and embrace their imperial ventures. The sexualized images of Africa and the need for patriarchal authority to discipline and tame the disorder conjured by Britons using this kind of imagery to represent their activities found its most pointed expression in British understandings of the Igbo people. Igboland represented the most extreme, the most intractable characteristics of femininity as westerners understood it. Everything about the Igbo people—the climate in which they lived; their purported savagery and lack of culture; the discrete and scattered nature of their social and political organization—all these carried for Britons a particularly gendered and highly sexualized set of meanings. These meanings, in turn, invoked particular habits of thought that compelled certain actions in response to the need to impose masculine order over these unruly, dangerous sexual and feminine impulses, regarded as coming from the Igbo people explicitly, and, perhaps most frighteningly of all, from within themselves. The characteristics attributed to people like the Igbo demanded a certain set of responses that would instill in them the requisite values for the establishment of law and order and peace, and, not incidentally, protect the British from the dangers to morality and to life that the absence of these practices in Africans threatened them with: *furor africanus*, debased morals, “those almost intolerable tensions which Africa bred in white men, which continued long after its gravest menaces…had been tamed.”¹ British colonial officials sought to subjugate their fears of the Igbo people by, on the one hand, instilling in them the kinds of habits the British claimed to have adopted for themselves, and, on the other, by creating such distance between themselves and African peoples that the impulses they most feared could be effectively cordoned off by clear and impregnable boundaries.

North and South
Virtually every official story of Nigeria began with a detailed analysis of the differences—of race, language, custom, law, temperament, social and political organization, religion, culture, and physical environment—prevailing in the northern and the southern territories of Nigeria. Adventurers, administrators, and anthropologists attributed to all of West Africa a primitivism and savagery that had informed western accounts of the “dark continent” for centuries. But they found in Hausaland—the northern territories of the Nigerian region—practices they could recognize as not dissimilar to their own, systems of law and organization that they could comprehend and more readily accommodate to their own structures of thought.

The contrast between north and south as drawn by Lugard and adopted by others began with topography and climate, which carried meanings that extended far beyond the physical characteristics of each. The north was a land of “either open prairie and cultivation, or was covered by sparse and low forest of the deciduous ‘dry zone’ type. The central portion...forms a plateau...with a bracing climate.” These were aspects of geography familiar to Britons, described in positive terms. The south, on the other hand, was described as a land alien to Britons, a territory covered in large part by “primeval forest” through which flowed “a network of salt-water creeks, bordered by mangrove-swamp or vegetation so dense that it forms almost a wall of giant trees and undergrowth laced with creepers.” Animal stock known to Britain—horses, donkeys, cattle, sheep, and goats—inhabited the north, while the south suffered from infestations of tsetse and “other biting flies” that made it impossible for domesticated animals to survive. For humans, too, noted Lugard’s deputy chief secretary, A. C. Burns, “the forests and swamps of the south are naturally more unhealthy than the open country of the north.” “The open and healthier plains of the north,” he claimed, bred “the more virile races” of the country.

This association of land and climate with human traits drew upon an eighteenth-century geographical version of the humoral theory of hot and cold and wet and dry to explain racial and sexual differences and different stages of societal and political development on the basis of habitation in one of three climatic zones, torrid, temperate, or frigid. In the writings of a number of Enlightenment figures, including those of Adam Smith, David Hume, and Edward Gibbon, hot climates—those found in the torrid zones immediately adjacent to the equator—stimulated inordinate sexual desire and behavior; the populations residing there displayed few inhibitions and in fact regularly indulged in riotous sexual activity. The further one moved away from the equator, toward Europe, say, in the temperate zone, the degree of sexual passion exhibited by populations diminished, or at least was much more readily controlled. Further north, in the frigid zone, men and women were so indifferent to passion as to practically ignore each other. These various regimes of sexual desire and activity correlated with the extent to which the societies participating in them had developed their social, economic, and political systems.

For these theorists, the climatic influences that determined sexual passion and the relations between men and women also established the nature of social, economic, and political relations. Civilization and political liberty scarcely existed, according to these thinkers, in the hot climates of the torrid zone, where heat and uninhibited sexual activity sapped the energies of individuals and rendered them lethargic and compliant. In the more temperate regions of Europe, climate and sexual restraint enabled the development of societies that enjoyed the energy, productivity, and discipline necessary to produce political liberty and civic virtue. The commercial society of Britain, noted these philosophers, characterized by wealth, industry, political freedom, polite social relations, and the benefits of domesticity and separate spheres; and the “backward” societies of Africa, populated by indolent, slavish, lascivious men and women, provided a vivid contrast of the differential effects of climate and geography on progress and civilization.

Physically and culturally, the “virile” peoples of northern Nigeria displayed characteristics that appealed to and elicited admiration from their British conquerors. The Fulani people, for example, who had migrated to Hausaland from Mali in the second half of the fifteenth century, presented to British
observers a pleasing aspect. “They were wholly non-negroid, with slim figures, skin of a lovely bronze colour, fine-drawn European type of face, and straight, dark hair,” Margery Perham, an influential apologist for the British imperium in Africa, observed.\(^6\) They possessed a “naturally haughty, reserved, and serious character,” noted Charles Temple, Resident, Chief Secretary, and later Lieutenant-Governor of Northern Nigeria. They demonstrated “refinement,” lived a life of “frugal and simple” habits, and conducted themselves with dignity, “even to the point of suppressing all outward show of inner feelings,” a trait calculated to thrill upper-class Briton. Their “polite manners, court etiquette, hospitality, and… good behaviour and constraint” impressed British officials, as did their intelligence, diplomatic skill, and courage.\(^7\)

As one traveled south into a kind of intermediate zone inhabited by peoples who possessed an admixture of “negro blood,” the austerity and refinement of the Fulani people gave way to greater displays of wealth and vivacity. Temple described “more rude savage display and less courtly dignity;” he reported that “the people get less reserved and more open in their speech. This is sometimes taken as indicating a bolder, franker habit of mind. But such is not the case: what is really indicated is a more rudimentary mode of life, thought, and greater absence of self-control.”\(^8\) As one moved south further still, the character and temperament of the typical “negro race-type” prevailed: “a happy, thriftless, excitable person, lacking in self-control, discipline, and foresight, naturally courageous, and naturally courteous and polite, full of personal vanity, with little sense of veracity, fond of music, and ‘loving weapons as an oriental loves jewelry,’” as Lugard described him.\(^9\) These characteristics echoed those mobilized by nineteenth-century theorists who sought to justify British women’s confinement to a private realm of the domestic and oppose their entrée into the world of education and politics. Women, they said, lacked the masculine qualities of strength, resolve, and discipline that were indispensable to the liberal order; they were frivolous, empty-headed things who relied on intuition and emotion. Unequipped to handle the rigors of serious education, they dabbled in music and the arts. And while middle-class British women were purported to know no sexual feelings, they were nevertheless identified with nature—wild, unruly, controlled by their reproductive systems. Indeed, nineteenth-century society referred to women as “the Sex.” Men, on the other hand, this western gender ideology posited, possessed the capacity for reason and the ability to appreciate such abstract matters as law and justice; they belonged to culture, or civilization—controlled, systematic, symbolic of achievement and order.\(^10\)

Like the land, the northern territories of Nigeria possessed a history not entirely unlike that of Britain. Inhabited by Hausa peoples who were born of eons of migrations from North Africa, the northern territories had been home to “ancient states.” “Claiming descent from a mythical migrant from Baghdad, the Hausa had developed their seven original states, which included Kano, Zaria, Daura, Gobir and Katsina, at much the same time that Normans and Angevins were hammering England into shape,” wrote Perham. (Southern Nigerian peoples had no history until the arrival of the white man, she declared.)\(^11\) The ancient states of the northern territories enjoyed a level of legal, political, and economic development comparable to that of medieval Europe. Recognizable systems of law, authority, and commerce prevailed; in the south, by contrast, “at the date of Lugard’s coming...there was still nothing in untouched negro Africa to compare with the political and cultural sophistication of these ancient Hausa states, with their walled red cities, crowded mosques, literate mullahs, large markets, numerous crafts in metal and leather, far-ranging traders, and skilled production of a wide variety of crops.”\(^12\) The arrival of Islam in the north, Britons asserted, solidified an already well-developed political and administrative structure bequeathed by the Songhay empire. “The new faith brought with it a unifying and settled culture,” wrote Perham.\(^13\) A clearly-delineated legal code, enforced by learned judges “fearless in its impartial application” established order throughout the area. Lugard noted with approval that “the system of taxation was highly
developed, and the form of Administration highly centralised.”

Such a system was calculated to warm his heart and compel his admiration.

Justifications for the British incursion into northern Nigeria required a view of Islam as a faith that tolerated behaviors regarded as sinful or evil by Europeans but as perfectly consonant with African conditions and temperaments. In *The Dual Mandate*, Lugard described Islam as a militant creed which teaches contempt for those who are not its votaries, panders to the weakness of the African character—self-conceit and vanity. Centuries of lawless strife have made the African a worshipper of force, and he has been quick to adopt the creed of the conqueror, chiefly for the prestige it brought. Its very excesses, the capture of women as slaves and concubines, and the looting of villages, though hateful enough when he is himself the victim, form the beau ideal of his desires if he can be the aggressor. It is the law of might to which he is habituated.

“And there is much else which appeals to the African and suits his conditions in the religion of Mahomet,” he declared. “It sanctions polygamy, which is natural to the tropics…. Originating in the tropics, [Islam] is essentially a code and religion of the tropics, which has never made headway in the temperate zones, just as Christianity has been the religion of the temperate climates.” But for all that, Britons could hardly disguise their essential admiration for the impact Islam had had on Africans with whom it came into contact. Islam “has undeniably had a civilising effect, abolishing the gross forms of pagan superstition and barbarous practices, and adding to the dignity, self-respect, and self-control of its adherents,” Lugard claimed. “Christianity, on the other hand, has not proved so powerful an influence for the creation of political and social organisations…. Its more abstruse tenets, its stricter code of sexual morality, its exaltation of peace and humility, its recognition of brotherhood with the slave, the captive, and the criminal, do not altogether appeal to the temperament of the negro.”

In the south, to his disgust, religion reflected and exacerbated the chaos and even unknowability of social and political organization there. The people of south, he and others endlessly observed, were “held in thrall by Fetish worship and the hideous ordeals of witchcraft, human sacrifice, and twin murder.”

Some groups had “reached the tribal stage, with recognised chiefs and some cohesion for attack and defence;” others, like the kingdoms of Benin and Dahomey had “evolved systems of government more or less efficient under paramount rulers, with an elaborate subdivision of authority and ceremonial observance…. Where these institutions were of indigenous growth, or fell under the rule of dynasties preponderantly negro, they appear to have become despotisms marked by ruthless disregard for human life. Holocausts of victims were sacrificed to appease the deity, or at the whim of the despot.” In no instance, no matter how well organized they might have been socially, had they been able to establish “a written language, or any approach to culture.”

Other groups, in the minds of Britons who could not read or misunderstood the social or political organizations of people they came across in the south, had not progressed even as far as the “tribal stage.” “The majority,” wrote Perham, “were still dispersed in their small lineage groups amongst scattered villages and without any political unity.” “The tribal authority had already broken down,” observed Lugard, “and had been succeeded by a complete collapse of native rule under the disintegrating influence of middlemen traders, and of the Aros. The latter are described as professional slave-traders who ruled by the terror of the *Juju*.” He claimed that the Egba chiefs “lived a life of idleness and sensuous indulgence,” and characterized both chiefs and people as being “inclined to lawlessness and impatient of control.” In contrast to the north, where government was based on “a recognition of the authority of the Native Chiefs [and] the policy of the government was that these Chiefs should govern their own people, not as independent but as dependent Rulers,” the governments in the south had shown themselves “incapable of exerting such a discipline, the meaning of which they did not understand.” The Igbo, in particular, Lugard claimed, “had not developed beyond the state of primitive savagery,” they “recognize
no chief and are still in the patriarchal stage, lacking any but the most rudimentary communal organization... the family is the unit, and even the village head has little authority. Among many both sexes are entirely nude.”

Nudity

The juxtaposition of primitive savagery, the absence of social or political order, and nudity is important here: for Britons, the three went hand in hand. Indeed, one signified the others, in conformity with the taxonomic systems that emerged from eighteenth-century scientific rationalism. These sought to categorize human beings on an evolutionary scale that placed Europeans at the pinnacle and Africans at the bottom. In this representation of humankind, Africans served to delineate the place where humans and animals merged, establishing the African as the “very embodiment of savagery,” as John Comaroff and Jean Comaroff put it. The conflation of primitive savagery and sexuality appeared early on in the stories about Amazons who inhabited West Africa and would ultimately be called upon to justify violence against those who resisted British efforts to expand their control of the area. Tales of “scantily attired” tattooed female soldiers in Dahomey brought home to Britain by adventurers and government officials excited the colonial imagination about Africa and African women. Since the late seventeenth century, armed, uniformed, disciplined women had served as palace guards to the king of Dahomey. By the time Europeans arrived in the eighteenth century, they had taken on the functions of warriors. Their size, strength, and demeanor led Europeans to dub them “Amazons,” after the ancient Greek stories of savage women warriors. The gender and sexual disorder exemplified by Amazon women could be readily adduced by their “masculine physiques” and unwomanly traits. “Such...was the size of the female skeleton, and the muscular development of the frame,” observed Richard Burton in 1893, “that in many cases feminity [sic] could be detected only by the bosom.” Europeans regarded Amazons as superior to male soldiers in discipline, skill, loyalty, effectiveness, and ruthlessness. By the late nineteenth century, stories circulated widely in Britain of Amazons who engaged in horrific hand-to-hand combat using sharpened fingernails and razors to kill, mutilate, and then eat their foes; of women who brought back the scalps, genitals, and internal organs of their fallen enemies to display as trophies. As Burton’s widow claimed, Amazons were “crueler and fiercer than men,” creatures who tortured their prisoners and cut open the bellies of pregnant women.

For Burton, the reported savagery of Amazon women in battle comported exactly with their “bestial” natures, which not only rendered them unmeet companions for Dahomean men but also accounted for the “inordinate polygamy of the race.” His insistence on the promiscuous behavior of Amazon women contrasted sharply with other European accounts of them. Commander Frederick Forbes, for instance, who had traveled to Dahomey in 1849 as an emissary of the British government, remarked upon the celibacy of Amazon women, believing it to be a consequence of the warrior elements of their nature, in effect arguing that their sexual impulses had been sublimated to their bloodlust. “The extreme exercise of one passion will generally obliterate the very sense of the others,” he had written. “The Amazons, whilst indulging in the excitement of the most fearful cruelties, forget the other desires of our fallen nature.” Burton disagreed, arguing that “all the passions are sisters. I believe that bloodshed causes these women to remember, not to forget LOVE; at the same time that it gratifies the less barbarous, but, with barbarians, equally animal feeling.” His pairing of the sexual with what he regarded as the violence and savagery of the Amazons foreshadowed and informed subsequent depictions of African women in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Burton’s depictions would re-emerge in newspaper accounts of the killing of a party of Britons by Edo men in Benin City in Nigeria in 1897, and, more importantly for our purposes, in the descriptions of the
Igbo women by British officials as they sought to recount and explain the actions British troops took against them in November and December of 1929. The Benin City events resulted from British efforts to extend trading rights into the interior of the Niger Delta area in what would become southern Nigeria. In the late fall of 1896, the Oba, or king, of Benin refused to allow outside traders to do business in his kingdom, an act that violated, as the British saw it, a treaty enacted in 1892 that had established British sovereignty over the area and done away with, for all intents and purposes, Benin independence. An overzealous official by the name of Phillips, serving in place of the absent deputy consul general, opted to prove his worth to his superiors by taking an unarmed group of men to meet with the Oba in Benin City and resolve the impasse. Both the Oba’s emissaries and others sent a number of warnings to the party to stop their advance, but the British persisted. In response, Edo men attacked the group, killing all but two of its members. The British reacted swiftly. Within three weeks, a force of 1,500 soldiers had been amassed, and on February 18, 1897, it raided and occupied Benin City and exacted its revenge, looting the city and shooting many of its inhabitants.

The incident arose from British attempts to break the trade monopolies of the Oba of Benin. Accounts in the British press, in a memoir produced by one of the survivors, Captain Alan Boisragon, and in a book by the intelligence officer, R. H. Bacon, who accompanied the British raid on Benin City, however, glossed over this inconvenient fact, and presented the actions of the British as heroic efforts to bring civilization to savage barbarians. As the Illustrated London News put it, the Edo engaged in “habits of disgusting brutality and scenes of hideous cruelty and bloodshed, ordained by the superstitions of a degraded race of savages.” Presumably, such characteristics justified the British in taking away their independence and visiting violent punishment upon them when they resisted encroachment.

The March 27, 1897, edition of the Illustrated London News carried a supplemental section covering the Benin expedition from information purportedly gathered from eyewitness accounts. Drawings of a field containing human skulls and skeletal remains accompanied text that recounted scenes of human sacrifice, mutilation, and altars soaked in human blood. Boisragon’s book told of cannibalism, torture, and “streams of dried human blood, the stench of which was too awful, the whole grass portion of the Compounds simply reeking with it,” implying that the deaths of the Britons killed in Benin City had been owing to their “glorious work of rescuing the native races of West Africa from the horrors” of their uncivilized practices. Bacon’s Benin, City of Blood, depicted the Edo as simian-like in their visage and carriage.

The “degradation” and “savagery” attributed to the peoples of Benin often found representation in images of Benin women, especially in what were purported to be their sexual and marital relations. Where West Africans who had consented to British sovereignty were shown fully clothed in photographs, the women of Benin appeared half-naked. Polygyny and what was meant to suggest female hypersexuality, portrayed in a press photograph of nude Benin women gathered around a single man, signified to Britons the degeneracy of African societies. As if the photo itself was insufficient to convey the proper message, the caption below instructed that “the women develop, as usual in these regions, at a very early age.”

The absence of civilization, made manifest by the presence of unclad women, compelled and justified British incursions into Benin society and violence against its members. Lugard’s earlier characterization of the Egba people as “sensuous” no doubt justified his own violence against the southern peoples of Nigeria as the British went about pacifying the area.

The messiness of southeastern Nigeria, created through the ills of heterarchical political structures, religious practices, and social organizations found its most unsettling expression in the habits of undress practiced by many Igbo women. As we will see in Chapter 4, nudity operated in Igbo society as a means of ensuring the conformity of girls and women to communal behavioral norms, but what Igbo-speaking peoples regarded as a question of morality Britons appeared to interpret as something akin to
Britons seemed fascinated—even obsessed—with the nudity of African women, capturing and disseminating photographs of naked women from southern Nigeria in works authored by anthropologists, missionaries, and journalists. D. Amaury Talbot’s ethnography, *The Ibibios of Southern Nigeria: Woman’s Mysteries of a Primitive People* (1915), scattered pictures of bare-breasted women throughout its pages. CMS missionary George Basden’s *Ibos of Nigeria* (1921) illustrated with countless shots of naked women such statements as “the word ‘morality’ has no significance in the Ibo vocabulary.” Even E. D. Morel’s *Affairs of West Africa* (1902), a book he described as “an honest attempt to deal with the problems, racial, political and commercial,...connected with the administration of Western Africa by Great Britain and by the other Powers of Western Europe which participated in the scramble for African territory,” contained a photograph of an “Ibo family group”—three naked women and a small naked toddler. In keeping with the contrasts Britons drew between southern Nigerians and those in the northern territories, Morel’s illustration of a “pure-bred” Fulani woman showed her clothed in a garment that covered her breasts, even if it was worn off the shoulders. In an almost impossibly bald representation of an example of a “half-caste Fulani girl”—a woman who might inhabit that intermediate land between the arid north and the tropical south—Morel’s photo presented a woman covered from the waist down by a full-length wrap skirt; from the waist up, she is naked. Just as contemporary readers have grown up with the images of non-western women presented in *National Geographic* as virtually always naked, the photographs made available by anthropologists, missionaries, and journalists provided Britons at home with a particularly sexualized depiction of southern Nigerian women, forming then, like *National Geographic* now, “a central part of the image of the non-West that it portrays.” And like *National Geographic* has done for non-western women, the photographs of naked southern Nigerian women imputed to them “erotic qualities or even sexual license.” The nudity in the books of people like Talbot, Basden, and Morel, like the “nudity in *Geographic* photographs[,] has had a potential sexual, even pornographic, interpretation.”

**“The Man on the Spot”**

The messiness of the southern territories evoked for colonial officials the messiness of femininity, the unruly impulses that threatened their rule and their identity. The contrast with the north struck them forcibly, heightening their disdain not only for the indigenous peoples of the south but the Europeans who worked or served there. Northern Nigeria offered imperialists a frontier experience, uncontaminated by the commercial operations and religious missions that characterized the Niger Delta and inland southern territories. Even as late as 1927, long after Nigeria had been “pacified,” Britons found northern Nigeria to be “a very primitive country.” The martial races of the northern Nigerian emirates had been conquered by men like Lugard; their subsequent rule fell to young men whose inexperience and vast responsibilities required that they learn and “prove themselves on the job.” From the exploits of these men on the spot emerged the mythic character of the district officer wielding indirect rule. Believing that their “integrity, fairness, firmness, and likeableness” won the “trust and loyalty of their charges,” these officials could, in the apparent and putative absence of any institutional support, attribute their success in controlling millions of alien peoples to their exalted stature as men. Their obvious fitness to rule certified their obvious right to rule. As even E. D. Morel, a critic of empire, admiringly affirmed, the district officer in Northern Nigeria managed, “almost single-handed, a country as large as Scotland; when ones sees that man, living in a leaky mud hut, holding, by sway of his personality, the balance even between fiercely antagonistic races, in a land which would cover half a dozen of the large English counties; when one sees the marvels accomplished by tact, passionate interest and self-control; with utterly inadequate means, in continuous discomfort, short-handed, on poor pay, out here in Northern Nigeria—then one feels
that permanent evil cannot ultimately evolve from so much admirable work accomplished, and that the end must be good.” “So developed did the cult of personality in Northern Nigeria become,” historian Kathryn Tidrick has asserted, “that even in dealing with rude and warlike pagans it was bad form to stoop to securing their acquiescence in the will of the government by resort to force.”

Lugard exemplified “the man on the spot” and he sought men who shared his background and experience to serve in the administration of the northern provinces. These would generally be drawn from the professional and landed classes, men who possessed no specific qualifications to recommend them but who had, as Sylvia Leith-Ross put it, “learnt the rights and responsibilities of those set in authority and they knew how to command, easily, certain they would be obeyed. They administered justice as they had seen their fathers do among the poachers and petty thieves of their own countryside, without searching or questioning, but with an innate sense of what was just and what was unjust.” They were Englishmen, Scotsmen, and Irishmen “imbued,” long-time colonial administrator Hugh Clifford declared, “with a natural love of fair play, sympathy with the ‘underdog’ and a traditional sense of responsibility and of the obligations of white men toward the subject races.” Sent out to tropical Africa with instructions to “maintain order, protect the weak, influence and control the strong, and generally to establish confidence and bring the troubled land into a decent state of peace and quietude by any means that their unaided commonsense might suggest,” as Clifford explained it, these men “wrought [a] miracle,” delivering to Britain “a vast area, peopled at that time by some fifteen millions of human beings, redeemed from lawlessness and, in many instances, from bestial barbarity, and reduced in the space of a quarter of a century to a state of peace, prosperity, law and order.”

Northern Nigeria, like many frontier outposts of the British empire, was “man’s country.” In the most literal sense of the term, colonial officials and the military officers attached to them operated in an almost exclusively male world. White women were not present for all intents and purposes, and native women did not enter into the calculations of colonial policy, in keeping with a western understanding of gender relations that still relegated women to activities centering either on home or family or on the sexual gratification of men. Until 1920, wives only rarely accompanied their husbands to Nigeria; special permission might be given to high-ranking officials to bring their wives along and even to mid-level officials if the stations in which they worked happened to have housing for married officers. But their numbers were necessarily small. “I think in the whole of my eighteen months I only spoke to a white woman about three times,” Martin Lindsay remembered, “probably just to say good afternoon when she came to watch a polo game, and nothing more than that. No white woman spent more than nine months at a time there and, of course, there wasn’t a single white child in the whole of the country.” The harsh conditions of life for Britons in West Africa would have certainly dissuaded many women from venturing there, even had they been welcome. They were not, in keeping with the masculine traditions of the Colonial Service, one of many institutions that maintained a rigorous segregation from women that began for boys of the elite classes in public schools.

When they arrived in Nigeria, they found in the Colonial Service an ethos to which they had become long accustomed, with “its ‘masculine’ ideology, its military organization and processes, its rituals of power and hierarchy, its strong boundaries between the sexes.” As Helen Calloway has observed, British women within the Colonial Service were regarded not merely as subordinate to men, but were positively unwelcome. Nor were they needed, as male clerks took care of all the clerical and bureaucratic duties, male servants performed as domestic servants in living quarters, and indigenous women carried out the functions of sexual partners. Even when the numbers of British women increased, white women felt an acute sense of alienation from their male counterparts. Mrs. Horace Tremlett, wife of a mining engineer in Nigeria in the years before the Great War, wrote in 1915 that “I often found myself reflecting rather bitterly on the insignificant position of a woman in what is practically a man’s country…If there is one
As Calloway has argued, this was not simply an all-male environment. Even when women were admitted to its confines, members of the Colonial Service represented it as an utterly masculine enterprise, and Nigeria as an arena in which men could demonstrate their manliness and prove their masculinity. (Missionary women had been present in West Africa since the 1890s, but they, along with their male colleagues, were scorned by British officials, who feminized them.) Frank Hives, a district commissioner in Nigeria in the years before the Great War, “accustomed to life in the wilds,” according to his ghost author, “really liked it better than a tamer existence under more settled conditions.” In the frontier environment, “women were perceived as an addition—in some ways helpful, perhaps an unnecessary luxury and distraction, often a burden, possibly a danger.” Sylvia Leith-Ross, one of the few women who did make the voyage to northern Nigeria in the company of her husband, arrived in Lagos with her brother, who was appointed Lieutenant-Governor of the Southern Provinces in 1925. She found the city unsettling, a disquiet she attributed to the presence of white women. “This was a very different Nigeria to the one I had known,” she lamented. “The busy, cacophonous city,” especially for “those who were accustomed to the more sedate ways of the North,” was difficult to get used to. The presence of women struck her most forcefully, and while she professed to find it a positive development, she could not keep from expressing her dismay about the change it induced in British officials stationed there. “After the masculine North, the presence of so many expatriate women—there were not children yet—came to me as a surprise,” she explained.

It was all to the good: houses, gardens, food—and therefore health—improved, yet their coming brought in a new element. Marooned all day in their impersonal PWD [Public Works Department] houses, without means of transport (it was some five miles to Lagos), with few household duties and little interest in the country, it was no wonder that, after a long, hot, empty day, these young wives claimed a husband’s full attention when he returned from work, and looked upon it as their right to be considered and amused. Perforce, the pattern of a man’s life changed: the job was no longer the centre; he was no longer single-minded. An unofficial meeting was put off because he had promised his wife to play tennis; a report was not written that evening because she had arranged a bridge party. He hoped he would not be posted to an unhealthy or isolated station; he was no longer keen on doing much touring.

For Leith-Ross, the femininity associated with western bourgeois women came to stand in for all she found distasteful about southern Nigeria.

The wives themselves, with time so heavy on their hands, fell prey to small rancours, small jealousies, the desire to go one better than their neighbours. It has been said that the appearance of the first silver coffee-pot changed the face of Nigeria…. In the very early days, wives…had led what might truly be called a pioneer life which only their wit and courage, their shared interest in their husbands’ work, their belief in its value, had made tolerable for a woman. Now the life had softened, especially in the longer-occupied South. In Lagos and Ikoyi [a European island suburb], it had become almost luxurious—and increasingly expensive.

Life in southern Nigeria compelled a particular set of behaviors among British officials if they were to maintain colonial rule. “One didn’t go out carrying the banner of Wellington, but one did go out imbued with certain standards,” stated Leith-Ross. The “certain standards” with which one went out into the African “bush” could be reflected in mundane ways, but they denoted an adherence to principles of order, discipline, and control. Alan Field, a long-time and much-experienced colonial officer, offered one such concrete example in his warning to trainees in 1905 that

if you are in the Bush and run into a white man’s camp, and the European is unshaven, with pyjamas or dirty flannels tucked into mosquito boots, you can confidently look for a dirtily kept outfit, dirty servants, and slack police. The shaven boss in comfortable old but clean kit, on the contrary will welcome you to a camp like himself, old and warn in outfit perhaps, but all smart and workmanlike. You will get a cooler drink quicker at the latter camp than in the former, and without your host having to shout and rave for it.
Sometimes the need to uphold standards produced hilarious scenes. Leith-Ross recounted a time that she, an assistant resident named Armar Auchinleck journeyed up the Niger in steel canoes en route to their assigned stations, a trip that took several days. “We had always dressed for dinner,” she asserted. “This was a rule that could not be broken, either at home or abroad, at sea or on shore, in the Arctic Circle or on the Equator.” Owing to the small size of their canoes, they could not conform to their social edict as fully as they as they might wish, so they compromised. In the evenings, they came ashore in order to dine—“we would not have used a less formal word”—by the light of a Lord’s lamp hung from a tripod, having donned at least some alternative article of clothing that enabled them to feel they had “dressed.”

One night Leith-Ross would change her blouse, Auchinleck his breeches; on another, she would put on a different khaki skirt, he a different shirt. In this manner, Leith-Ross explained, “we had obeyed our code and had upheld our own and our country’s dignity.”

To our eyes comical, this anecdote reveals a great deal about the meaning system within which British imperialism operated in Africa. Clothing—their “social skin,” as Terence Turner calls it—reminded the British who they were, what they stood for, how they were different from the subjects they sought to rule; it stiffened their resolve and protected them from succumbing to the dangers and temptations of the land. A boundary system set up to keep out women and femininity on the one hand, and Africans on the other, who were very frequently coded “feminine” in the imaginations of Britons, required constant shoring up. “When you are alone, among thousands of unknown, unpredictable people,” Leith-Ross declared, “dazed by unaccustomed sights and sounds, bemused by strange ways of life and thought, you need to remember who you are, where you come from, what your standards are. A material discipline represents—and aids—a moral discipline.” Moral discipline, in turn, Britons believed, implied the possession of the physical endurance and resolve necessary to exercise power over “swarming thousands of Africans,” as Clifford described them. Leith-Ross explained this dynamic in her analysis of a photograph of a group of Britons buttoned up in jackets and ties.

Ridiculous as it may seem to find moral significance in a casual group photograph, one begins to understand how it was that such a handful of men could dominate the land. Collars and ties were foolish social convention, yet, in the context of that merciless heat, the obedience to the convention took on an heroic aspect. Backbone was required to fasten a collar stud; backbone was what the country required… In those days, in so great a loneliness, yet watched so closely by alien eyes, too much lowering of standards would have been dangerous.

Joyce Cary echoed this view in a letter to his wife in 1916: “Out there… the position of every white man, sometimes his life, depends on his caste, his prestige. After all it’s only our prestige that keeps these millions of black men in order at all. Prestige is important to every white man in Nigeria, so important there are a thousand rules made to support it that are not needed in more civilised places.”

It was not just that native peoples could presumably read the Euro-pean value system embedded in clothing and respond to it as should be expected; one’s own moral discipline needed continually to be shored up in a land that seemed constantly to be undermining it. Serving in tropical West Africa challenged Britons in nearly every particular. The heat, humidity, and incidence of disease took a heavy toll; in the early twentieth century, one in five Britons either died or was forced by ill health to leave the area. Isolation and prolonged loneliness could send the sanest men over the edge. Indeed, legend had it that “either you died of fever or of drink, went mad through loneliness or, worst of all, went native.”

Field allowed that the West African coast did indeed have “a notoriously bad climate,” but he blamed the high incidence of disease and death on the dissolute habits of the “Old Coasters” who populated the Delta region of Nigeria. “Until recent years,” he asserted, the best class of man has not been attracted to the country, and the Coast was to a very large extent a dumping ground for undesirables. … men, often the black sheep of good families, who by dissipation and by those very courses which were the cause of their exile,
arrived with nervous tissues worn and stamina undermined, in a physical condition least qualified to ward off the results of fever and hardships. Neither were they in a mood to be prudent, and malaria loves the reckless. Furthermore, they understood the mixing of cocktails too well and the might of the sun too little. 

More recent arrivals, better men who could appreciate and follow the advice of a man like Field, started their tours equipped with all the items of clothing deemed necessary for survival in a fever-ridden land: “a khaki-drill Norfolk jacket and trousers, with three pairs of riding-breeches,…together with two sets…of white-drill mess jacket and trousers and a silk mess cummerbund.” The formal mess kit would be *de rigueur* in the established stations and “good to wear…at Bush stations.” A variety of hats were required: a sun-topi, a double-terai hat, a panama, and a cap, all designed to protect the Englishman “out in the noonday sun.” Warding off fever demanded that “wool vests MUST be worn underneath” shirts; the newcomer was admonished to bring with him “six all-wool vests and short drawers, four flannel cummerbunds to be buttoned over the all-wool pyjama coat, and two thick long, wool drawers for voyage and fever.” Quilted spine-pads stuffed with cotton wool were to be worn along the back to absorb perspiration and stave off “fever, sunstroke and retching.” “One of the worst features of prickly heat,” explained Field, “is that there is a temptation not to wear wool next [sic] the skin,” but spine-pads were essential. Not only did they soak up sweat, they served also to make men stand up straight by the way they hung down their backs. Standing erect—not wilting or going limp—signified to Britons that their moral and physical discipline over themselves and their African charges remained intact.

“Going native”

Letting down that moral and physical discipline could lead to disaster. Remaining “British” took an emotional toll that could not always be sustained: men in the hinterlands succumbed to “the acute loneliness, which could produce the sudden outbursts of black rage known as *furor Africanus*.” Lonely and uncomprehending of the ways of the people he purported to rule, Joyce Cary, stationed far from other Britons in Borgu, intimated to his wife on a number of occasions that he suffered from the affliction. In 1917, he told her, “I haven’t exchanged a word of rational conversation since May, and this is getting on to the end of September. When I do talk English, I have to pick up the simplest words and repeat my meaning in two or three forms…. All this makes it easy for me to understand the queer cases out here of fellows drinking themselves to death, getting homicidal mania, or breaking down nervously into neurotic wrecks, when in the back bush by themselves.” His biographer recounted that “he was fully aware that the gravest danger of such loneliness was a loss of mental balance,” citing a letter Cary wrote to his wife: “A bush-hate is one of those unreasoning fancies which seize you when you are alone in the bush. Everyone knows ‘em out here. They lead sometimes to strange and even tragic results.”

Perhaps one of the greatest fears British colonial officials faced was the prospect of “going native.” “Going native” meant throwing off the trappings of a respectable British upbringing, the first manifestation of which might be isolating oneself from fellow Britons and the activities they joined in while off duty—polo, cricket, tennis, or cocktails at the mess or the club. A more advanced step in the process might see a British official spending more time with Africans than his duties warranted, observing their activities and practices not with an eye towards advancing his knowledge in order to enhance his administrative skills, but with an attitude of respect and admiration for them in and of themselves. This might be the prelude to engaging with Africans for purely social purposes; stepping across the rigid barriers that separated Briton from African, civilized from savage, order from chaos, and kept Britons from being “swamped” by the “hordes” of “teeming” Africans they faced each day.

The subtext of “going native” almost certainly involved Britons crossing the color line to engage in sexual relations—often coerced or forced—with African women. (One observer of colonial life observed
about French imperialists that they ‘‘went native’ and intermarried with Congo women.” Martin Lindsay noted that “the convention was abstinence for most people for most of their tour, and that was the position in the central stations like mine, but I think that in the outposts most people probably had an African girl living with them.” “Of course,” he noted, “they did learn to speak the language far better than those of us who lived a life of abstinence.” These women were referred to as “‘sleeping dictionaries,’ from their obvious advantages as language instructors.” Walter Miller, a CMS missionary posted to Nigeria, acknowledged that the Britons he met were “brave English officers, genial, good-natured,” but, he lamented, they were “utterly ungodly, all living loose lives, all having women brought to them wherever they are.” Sir Alan Burns, who came to Nigeria in 1912, conceded that some Britons did behave that way, attributing this breach of officialBritishness to the “Old Coasters,” who, he asserted with disdain, regarded the area around Lagos and the Delta as “essentially a bachelor’s paradise, where a man could dress as he pleased, drink as much as he liked, and be easy in his morals without causing scandal.” Men who acted in this way jeopardized the British mission to civilize Africa, which constituted, in the imaginations of British imperialists, imposing a masculine, patriarchal, austere discipline over unruly, feminized impulses. In this way of thinking, African people were not the only subjects of British regulation; sometimes, the unruly feminized impulses that threatened British control could be found among their own countrymen and women in West Africa, and, indeed, deep down, among themselves.

Most often this fear of succumbing to the irrational impulses of drink or women found expression in the distinctions Lugard and his acolytes drew between colonial officials who served in the southern territories and the Niger Delta region of Nigeria and their compatriots in the north. “Old Coasters,” as we have seen from the depictions of Field and Burns, had gained a reputation for dissolution, corruption, promiscuity, drunkenness, and overall decadence. Northern officials regarded them with ill-concealed contempt and hostility. Sylvia Leith-Ross recounted “the care with which those going to Northern Nigeria were segregated from those going to Southern Nigeria” on board ship. Until the time of the amalgamation of north and south in 1914, she declared, “no colour bar could be as strong as the intangible wall which stood between the Protectorate of Northern Nigeria and the Colony and Protectorate of Southern Nigeria. Even on the neutral ground of shipboard, no purser would have dreamt of asking a Northerner and a Southerner to share the same cabin, nor would a chief steward have ventured to seat them at the same table.” She confessed that she “shared the prejudice, saw all Southern officials as fat and white and flabby, while in the North they were lean and lank and brown; knew they began drinks at 6 pm while we waited till 6.30 pm, and believed the grim tale that they traveled carried in a hammock while we galloped on horses or climbed arduous hills on our own feet.” The “Holy Northerners” prided themselves on their austere, military attitudes towards themselves and their charges, scorning the degenerate, loose ways of the casual, hard-drinking Old Coasters.

Amalgamation

Northerners kept themselves wholly apart from southerners until the exigencies of colonial finances drove them together. As we have seen, the Southern Protectorate of Nigeria had come into existence in 1906 with the merger of the Niger Coast, Lagos, and Oil Rivers protectorates. “Pacification” in much the south had been accomplished by 1900 through a combination of treaties with the Yoruba, the forcible conquest of Benin, and the military domination of the states in the Niger Delta. The eastern territories in the south proved far more resistant to British control, however; British forces undertook numerous expeditions into Igbo territory in order to subdue the Igbo peoples and gain control over the region and could not make good their claim to exercise authority there until 1906. In 1911, as noted above, the Colonial Office asked
Lugard, who was serving in Hong Kong at the time, to return to West Africa in order to consolidate the Protectorates of Northern Nigeria and Southern Nigeria into a single administrative entity under its auspices. Once he finished this huge effort in 1914, Lugard became the first governor of a united Colony and Protectorate of Nigeria. He served in this capacity throughout the Great War, retiring in 1918.

British authorities sought the amalgamation of the northern and southern portions of Nigeria for financial reasons: they believed that the revenues generated by taxing the commerce of the prosperous south would cover the shortfalls characteristic of the north, enabling the new colony of Nigeria to conform to the long established policy of making colonies pay for themselves. Lugard also believed that by amalgamating north and south he would be able to impose the governing structures prevailing in the north over the southern provinces. The way he saw it, the north needed more prosperity, the south “a better organisation of its Native Administration and of its judicial system.” Neither Lugard nor any other Briton familiar with West Africa expected the merger to be anything but administrative—the two areas were simply far too different from one another to admit of anything more. As Margery Perham noted, it was an amalgamation of administrations, not of peoples; of systems, not of identities. Lugard claimed to believe that the resulting whole would be more than the mere sum of its parts. “Amalgamation in my view was ‘not a mere political, geographical, or more especially a financial expression,’” he explained. “I regarded it rather ‘as a means whereby each part of Nigeria should be raised to the level of the highest place attained by any particular part.’” His writings belie such a generous view of what each had to offer the other; the south, for Lugard and other colonial officers who served in the north, was a distinctly inferior junior partner in the merger. Lugard’s story of the amalgamation of Nigeria became the official version of the process; Perham took up his account and disseminated it throughout the Colonial Service, much to the dismay of officers who had served in the south and had a different tale to offer.

Bringing civilization to the southern peoples of the Nigerian territories meant, Lugard thought, exporting the forms of government, taxation, and administration that served the northern territories so well. Imposing indirect rule on the north after the emirs had been pacified by the West African Frontier Force had been a simple action of conferring the imprimatur of authority on those who pledged loyalty to British; what Lugard regarded as “an elaborate administrative machinery” was already in place and could be readily recruited to establish order and collect revenues. In the south, by contrast, the absence of any centralized administration among native peoples made the task far more difficult. E. D. Morel, editor of African Mail and a proponent of amalgamation, called the southern administration “a thing of shreds and patches.” As Chief Justice Sir E. Speed put it, “it is difficult to describe a system where in fact no system existed.” The fact that “no one—neither the Colonial Office nor the Chief Justice—had any clear idea as to what jurisdiction could legally be exercised by the Crown, or what executive powers were, under the Treaties [with the Egbas, other Yorubas, and other groups], vested in the Colonial Government,” nearly drove Lugard around the bend. “The whole question of jurisdiction was in a chaotic state,” he lamented. “Even the boundaries of the Colony proper had never been defined.” In the Lagos hinterland, residents and commissioners were uncertain about their powers. “The Provisional Commissioner whom I deputed to report on the Administrative position, stated that the further his enquiries extended the more chaotic he found it.”

Amalgamating the northern and southern territories provided Lugard and his followers many opportunities to vent their spleen against both the southern Nigerian peoples and the Britons who presided over them. Just as the southern peoples and the lands they inhabited exasperated Lugard and others with their imprecise, chaotic organization and lack of order, the colonial officials who served in the southern territories excised the scorn of their northern colleagues. The “hard men of the north,” as they liked to call themselves, who had endowed the northern peoples they governed with many of the characteristics they believed they displayed—reticence, austerity, orderliness, law, and virility—attributed to the “Old
Coasters” of the south many of the characteristics they believed the southern “pagan” peoples to possess: lack of stability, slovenliness, drunkenness, promiscuity, and general messiness and disarray. Lugard wrote to Flora Shaw on November 13, 1912, to tell her that “in Administration there seems to be a perfect chaos. . . . It is clear that this Administration wants regularly cleaning out like the Augean Stables.”69 He found the contrast between the northern and southern provinces “extraordinary—N. Nigeria runs itself,” he exclaimed. “In S. Nigeria, on the other hand, papers pour in and they have large questions of policy, etc., which might have been decided 12 years ago.”70 In the system in northern Nigeria, which he had created, “under the wide powers of the governor, everyone, British official, emir, counselor, alkali, district-head, village-head and commoner had his place and knew it. By contrast, the administration of… southern Nigeria seemed to sprawl without unity or purpose.” Lugard decried “the baffling dispersal of authority presented by Ibo, Ibibio and the rest,” and found that the disarray of the south literally made him ill. “He seldom felt well in Lagos,” noted Perham. “Small wonder that, when he got clear of Lagos and of the shrouding monotony of the southern forests and stepped out of his train into the dry air of the north and the open, windy plains, and tasted again the atmosphere of graded authority, he felt a new man, or rather the former man, the untrammeled High Commissioner.”71

Part of what made Lugard sick about southern Nigeria was the intermingling of cultures and peoples who by all rights should remain distinct from one another. Africans who took on the trappings of European dress or culture, in particular, became creatures that could not be tolerated. Just as “going native” haunted the imaginations of Britons, the prospect of Africans becoming Europeanized evoked near hysterical reactions from British officials. Europeanized Africans, particularly men who had attained a level of western education and erudition that exceeded those of many of their white rulers, outraged Britons, who referred to them as “trousered apes” or “the cannibal chief in the Balliol blazer.”72 These educated Africans were presumed, by dressing according to European fashion, to be asserting themselves as equals to their white overlords.

Lugard blamed missionaries for having taught Africans that they might expect to interact with Britons on equal footing. Education, he asserted, “seems to have produced discontent, impatience of any control, and an unjustified assumption of self importance in the individual.” Education in western terms resulted “in the decay of family and social discipline, and too often in discontent and hostility to any constituted authority, masquerading as racial or national patriotism, or as the vindication of rights unjustly ignored.”73 Lugard’s protestations betrayed a fear that Britons’ position of superiority might be threatened by the very civilizing practices they claimed to be in Africa to spread. “The native who would go modern,” critics Catherine Lutz and Jane Collins have observed, “no longer allows the Western self to stand, in a unique dress sign, at the head of civilization’s march forward.”74 For many, the prospect of Africans actually being raised up to the level of Britons, becoming “civilized,” raised profound fears of miscegenation. Charles Temple, Lugard’s deputy, believed that Europeanized Africans would seek social equality with Britons, to enter their world as peers. He spoke strongly about the utter impossibility of Europeans and Africans “fusing,” as he put it tellingly, and feared that exposing Africans to western education, clothing, and political philosophies would only alienate them from their own people without giving them entrée to European society. Far from improving their lot, it would do them a great disservice, he insisted. “But,” he paused,
of standpoint is too great. I will not here go deeply into the moral and physical obstacles in the way of such unions, and will content myself with saying that in my humble opinion they are quite insurmountable; a point of view which I think that the vast majority of European officials who have come into contact with natives and who have had the opportunity of observing the result of such unions will endorse.

The editor of *West Africa* shared Temple’s alarm, writing in the January 2, 1926 issue of his paper, “We regard the creation of the people neither European nor African as the supreme racial disloyalty.”

Colonial officials had attempted to curb the “fusing” of Britons and Africans in 1909 when the colonial secretary, Lord Crewe, issued an edict—called the “concubinage circular”—forbidding colonial officers from fraternizing with African women. Asserting that “it is not possible for a member of the administration to countenance such practices without lowering himself in the eyes of the natives, and diminishing his authority to an extent which will seriously impair his capacity for useful work in the Service,” Crewe promised that violations of his circular would be punished. Lugard followed with a “Secret Circular B” of his own in Nigeria 1914, which provoked protestations both of “impracticality” and of “outrage” from his subordinates. This latter complaint resulted from an apparent association Lugard made of miscegenation with bestiality, and it forced him to rescind the edict.

Lugard proposed countless other reforms in order to achieve the segregation from Africans that he and others deemed necessary. He regarded education, for instance, not as a matter of imparting knowledge or skill but as a question of promoting “a better standard of discipline, self-control and integrity, combined with educational qualifications more adequate to the demands of the State and of commerce.” His New Ordinance for education, which asserted “that the primary object of all schools should be the formation of character and habits of discipline; and that the grant in aid [from Government] should be in part based on success in this direction,” became law in December 1916. It sought to curb the unfortunate side effects of instruction given by missionaries—learning that led to social, political, and even sexual presumption—by establishing government schools that included a strong dose of morality in the curriculum, learning that instilled in its students “the social and other incentives to gentlemanly conduct, the success which rewards self-control and industry.” Lugard regarded schools as institutions in which “the primary object [is] of training character, and inculcating discipline” in its charges; distrustful of missionaries in this regard, he demanded that each school “should be under the continuous control of a British master, that the pupils should, as far as possible, be boarders, and that the school should be situated at some distance from the native town, so as to detach the boys from undesirable influences…Games are encouraged as conducive to health and manliness and ideas of fair play.”

Above almost all other reforms, Lugard regarded taxation as an agent of civilization and morality. It was not simply that taxation represented acquiescence to British power, or provided him with the resources he needed to administer the colony, though it certainly did do both those things. More importantly for Lugard, taxation “emancipates natives from indolence” by promoting “individual and collective responsibility;” it compelled “industry” and thereby increased the “self-respect” of colonized subjects. Taxation protected Africans from “murdering traders and general lawlessness” because it “pushed[ed] each community a step further up the ladder of progress.” Indeed, so mighty was taxation an indication of civilization for Lugard that he used its existence in the northern territories of Nigeria to draw a favorable comparison of that region with Britain. The people of northern Nigeria, he wrote in 1905, were “the inheritors of a civilization which ranked high in the world when the British isles were in a state of barbarism, a civilization which later, through the Moors, placed Spain in the foremost rank of culture and progress. The races of Hausaland have from time immemorial been accustomed to taxation on the lines adopted by modern nations, graduate taxes on property, death duties, *ad valorem* dues and the like.”

In Lugard’s view and in those of his successors, it constituted a “moral charter” for civilized communities that should be imposed on the southern territories of Nigeria at the earliest possible
Disciplining southern Nigerians in the ways he proposed might take generations, as Lugard saw it. In the shorter term, other means would have to be devised to insulate Britons from them and the unruly, dangerous impulses they represented. British living quarters would have to be situated far from those of Africans, even those Africans employed as servants. Though they must be close enough to be called upon to provide for the comfort of their masters, “the servants’ quarters must be as distant as possible.” Lugard invoked the spectre of fever—one must at least consider that the fever might be sexual as well as malarial—to justify a strict segregation of Britons from Africans. Because “malarial germs…are present in the blood of most natives,” he argued, “and their dark huts and insanitary surroundings foster mosquitoes, by which these diseases are conveyed…Europeans should not sleep in proximity to natives, in order to avoid infection.” British fears of sexually-transmitted diseases like syphilis and gonorrhea reached hysterical proportions at times; Lugard established a series of what we would regard as zoning ordinances to segregate Britons from Africans “in the interests of social comfort and convenience” as well as “health and sanitation.” He ordered new townships to be “divided into European and native reservations, separated by a non-residential area 440 yards in breadth, cleared of high grass and scrub,” across which, presumably, social and physical disease could not pass. “Europeans are not allowed to sleep in the native reservation, and natives, other than domestic servants and other necessary employees, may not reside in the European quarter,” he declared. In anticipation of protest against and resistance to his plans, Lugard insisted that “what is aimed at is a segregation of social standards, and not a segregation of races. The Indian or African gentleman who adopts the higher standard of civilisation and desires to partake in such immunity from infection as segregation may convey, should be as free and welcome to live in the civilised reservation as the European, provided, of course, that he does not bring with him a concourse of followers.”

District officer Frank Hives, writing in the 1920s, claimed that the practices introduced by Lugard and others had “civilized” the Igbo people, which he measured almost exclusively by the covering of their bodies. “In the old days,” he wrote, “when one walked through the villages, with their garbage, indescribably filthy swine wallowing in muddy pools in front of smoke-stained hovels, every man, woman, and child was practically in a nude state. How changed it all is to-day. Walking through the same villages, which now have rows of well-kept, well-built houses,…one would pass hardly a native not dressed more or less in European fashion.”

The regular conflation of “civilization” with western-style standards of sexual morality appears, interestingly, in Margery Perham’s treatment of Lugard’s life, a sprawling biography of the man with whom the British presence in prewar Africa is identified. In some intriguingly suggestive ways, the story Lugard and then Perham told of the conquest of Nigeria betrays the very fears Britons harbored of falling prey to the sexualized seductions of Africa. As related by Lugard and Perham, the story of Nigeria is interwoven with the story of Lugard struggling for years to regain mastery and control over unwanted, unruly, violent emotions instilled in him by an unfaithful English woman, onto whom the terrifying powers of African sexuality may well have been displaced. As he wrote in his later years, “the real key to the story of a life lies in a knowledge of the emotions and passions which have sometimes disfigured, sometimes built up character, and in every case influenced the actions recorded. Of these the sexual instinct is recognized as the most potent for good or ill and it has certainly been so in my life.” Because he was recognized in his time as the quintessential representative of the British in Africa, a man involved in all three phases of British presence there—exploration, annexation, and administration, because he was regarded as “the chief agent of British rule in that continent in his generation,” the dramatic events of his private life may serve as a metaphor for the conquest and development of the colony of Nigeria at the hands of Europeans.
The ruler of Britain’s second most important colony, Lugard was born in India in 1858, an auspicious time during which the perceived betrayal of the Indian Mutiny transformed Britons’ relationship with their most important colonial possession. As a soldier on the subcontinent, Lugard partook in all of the activities open to a man of his class and caste, including polo, tiger-shooting, and pig-sticking. He remained largely aloof from European women, suspicious of their motives and capacity for fidelity, and expressed disdain for the charms of Indian women, regarding them as mere currency in a commercial exchange of sexual favors. He lived a life among men, smoking, drinking, riding, shooting, and yearning for the military action that might confer upon him the imprimatur of imperial manliness.

In 1886, transferred to Lucknow, “a large and famous station, full of dramatic memories of the Mutiny,” as Perham reminded us, Lugard met a woman—Perham called her Celia—who would change his life. Described as beautiful, intelligent, vibrant, and fearless—and a once-divorced married woman who had made “many conquests”—Celia captured his heart, indeed, his whole being, transporting him to a plane of existence he had never experienced.

He knew for a brief period an intensity of happiness and fulfillment which he could never experience again though he was to know a calmer and truer love later in life. He drew now upon all the reserves of his rich nature, and shared them—or thought he shared them—to the fullest extent that is conceivable between two persons. They rode together; they discussed all things under the sun; they read verse together and wrote it for and to each other; they watched the splendid settings of the tropical sun with an emotion that seemed to fuse their two identities… He kept nothing back, and with the rest he gave an unmeasured faith.

In July 1887, suffering from fever while on campaign in Burma, Lugard received a telegram from Celia calling him back to Lucknow. She had turned over a coach and four while driving through the town; her summons suggested that she was dying from her injuries. Lugard got leave by threatening to resign his commission and raced back to India, only to find that Celia had recovered sufficiently to sail home to England. He followed straightaway, landing upon her doorstep in London just in time to discover her effecting her recuperation in the arms of another man. In a description redolent with expressions of the outrage, shock, disbelief, and disillusion Britons felt when their Indian brothers, to whom they had pledged, or thought they pledged, all the gifts of English civilization—rose up in protest against their benevolent rule in 1857, Lugard is said to have been struck down and rendered nearly mad with grief and pain upon the discovery of her betrayal. In a statement just begging for the analogy of one kind of fever to another, Perham urged that “it must be remembered that he was suffering from persistent and neglected attacks of a type of fever contracted in Burma that was known to turn at its worst into melancholia and which had already resulted in several suicides among the military.”

Like Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli in 1873, who sought in imperial adventures beyond the shores of India some consolation for the rebuff that was the Indian Mutiny, Lugard turned in desperation to any activity that might distract him from his unhappiness and distress, which threatened to overwhelm him. He joined a London fire brigade, seeking danger and, probably, death, but it was not enough. His obsession for and revulsion from the woman who had stirred such fierce passions in him required that he leave England, for he feared “he would always be feverishly trying to see her or fighting with himself to keep away from her.” Memories of their time together ruled out a return to India; Europe offered no attraction. But Africa—remote, unknown, and dangerous—Africa might provide the combination of adventure and annihilation that he craved, might relieve some of his terrible anguish. Undone, nearly insane, and suicidal, Lugard sailed for Africa, telling himself that he wished to take up “work in the suppression of slavery,” leaving the reader to wonder which slavery—of his searing, tortured passions for Celia or of Africans to their Arab captors—he had in mind. “By chance,” at least as Perham would have it, he picked up on the ship Rider Haggard’s newly published The Witch’s Head, “in which the hero, crossed in love, also goes to central Africa.”

Lugard’s time fighting slavers in the Nyasa region of Africa seems to have worked like a tonic upon his
soul. Hopeless, depressed, fearing for his sanity, he found that his anti-slavery activity in a land that, like Celia, mingled “beauty and malice,” gave him “a cause worth living for.” His recovery of mind—if not of heart—seems to have paralleled that of his body after the raid on the slaver stronghold alluded to in Chapter 1. Shot at point-blank range, he received a wound that, like his love for Celia,

often made itself felt later. The bullet entered his right arm, carrying two lumps of wadding with it, passed through his elbow joint, though without fracturing it, pushed the artery aside, and entered the chest; deflected by a rib, it just missed the heart and emerged above the breast pocket. It then proceeded to enter the left wrist, pulverizing the main bone, cutting a minor artery and carrying into the wrist fragments of letters that were in his breast pocket. For another five years this last wound continued to give trouble and set Lugard the task of pulling out splinters of bone. That he survived at all, after crawling back through the bush for fourteen hours and then lying helpless for weeks in a hut with six suppurating bullet wounds, is a testimony to his physical and his moral strength.91

Perham could just as readily have been describing the injury done him by Celia and his subsequent recovery from it in the language she used to recount his East African adventures.

Lugard’s ability to survive the slings and arrows of both Celia and East African slavers led him ultimately to West Africa, where, as the representative of George Goldie’s Royal Niger Company, he was expected to open up portions of the northern reaches of the Niger river to trade and assert British treaty rights against those of French merchants seeking to do the same. As tensions between the British and the French grew in the late 1890s to reach crisis proportions, some British politicians—notably Joseph Chamberlain and Lord Salisbury—became anxious to establish a more definitive British presence so as to prevent the French from expanding their control at the expense of Britain’s. In this they had the support of the colonial editor of The Times, Flora Shaw, friend of Chamberlain and Goldie. Through Goldie, she met Frederick Lugard, and the two became good friends. From that time forward, though they did not know it, the progress of the British in West Africa was inextricably tied up with the relationship of Lugard and Shaw. Shaw, indeed, gave the name “Nigeria” to the various territories claimed by the British, setting the groundwork for an amalgamation of them, if not yet an organic unity and identity.

Flora Shaw shared with Frederick Lugard a deep commitment to increase the British presence in Africa and an ethos of service to the nation and the empire. She shared, too, an experience of jilted love that resembled Lugard’s quite closely in its devastating impact. Shaw had fallen in love with George Goldie in the course of her acquaintance with him and, when Goldie’s wife died in 1898, believed that they would legitimate their affair through marriage in due course. In the fall of 1901, something occurred between Goldie and Shaw to disabuse her of this notion, something that sent her crashing over the edge as Lugard had gone crashing in 1887. He rushed to her side with an offer of marriage, hoping to deflect “a blow which has broken her down mentally and physically,” as he told his sister-in-law. “I think from what I hear that she has barely escaped brain fever.” Though Shaw initially refused him, she agreed when he asked a second time.92

Lugard and Shaw came together in marriage as two friends devastated by the betrayal of their love for others, seeking the comfort of companionship and partnership. The anguish each suffered had not abated: Shaw’s wounds were too fresh and Lugard’s too deep; in spite of his long and happy marriage to Shaw, he never got over his obsession with Celia. The two were frank in their expectations of one another: friendship, not love, structured their union; regard, not passion, governed their emotions. Their marriage, Shaw noted, would constitute “a loyal friendship made absolute for life by the public tie with which we bind it;” she hoped to one day win Lugard’s love, as he did hers, but “we cannot force it. Let us not try to on either side: but let us be content to marry as friends.”93 They did, in the consulate at Gibraltar, marking before an official of the British government abroad an event regarded by observers as a marriage made in the national interest. As Edward Wilson of The Times put it, “I feel that you and he have done as much as any two people living for the cause of the Empire and the credit of the British name.” One of his colleagues agreed, saying that “the ‘arrangement,’ if I may say so, seems positively ideal.” And
arrangement it was; during their honeymoon, Lugard, owing to Shaw’s delicate health, “had to play the nurse rather than the husband.”94

We might see in Lugard’s efforts to bring order to his disordered mind, to discipline the disruptive, destructive passions invoked by an inconstant, promiscuous, immoral woman, and his marriage to a woman with whom he shared experiences, interests, and goals, and for whom he had the highest regard but no passion, the same kind of progress British colonial officials spoke about in their efforts to impose rule over the peoples and the lands of southern Nigeria and to consolidate the territories into a single colony. Just as amalgamation was regarded by Lugard as a means of bringing the order of the north to bear upon the chaos of the south, he may well have experienced the platonic love he shared with Flora Shaw as the means by which the chaotic feelings wrought by Celia could be disciplined and controlled. Perhaps observed that “to work through the records of [Flora Shaw’s] life and that of Lugard is to gain an impression of their moving, as if according to some predestined plan, step by step, but all too slowly, towards each other,”95 a sentiment that could be applied to the amalgamation of northern and southern Nigeria as well. For, as Perham noted of this latter union, it was, like the marriage of Lugard and Shaw, an “arrangement,” whereby, it was hoped, the extension of the attributes of each to the other would strengthen and render viable the resulting whole. And like their marriage, the amalgamation seemed to succeed, until it was challenged, in the first serious way, by the uprising of women across southeastern Nigeria in 1929, the year that Flora Lugard died.

Conclusion

In establishing an elaborate set of rules and regulations for the administration of southern Nigeria, Lugard was doing more than simply laying out the rudimentary elements of rule. He was, by creating an orderly system, bringing within the realm of his understanding people who baffled, frightened, and threatened him and virtually all Britons in Nigeria. By asserting policies for dress, living arrangements, a system of law and jurisprudence, and, above all, imposing taxation, Lugard sought to bring morality and certainty to what he experienced as a chaotic, unknowable environment. In doing so, he and others sought to stave off the unruly feminine impulses that threatened not only British rule in Nigeria but their masculine identity and, indeed, their very selves. Order enabled Britons to establish clear, knowable boundaries between themselves and the unruly, chaotic, feminine impulses that, for many of them, characterized Africans, and a series of proclamations issued by Lugard sought to establish and maintain distance between Africans and themselves. What they failed to see in the process, because women had not entered their field of vision as actors requiring their notice, was that the policies and practices they had imposed on the colony significantly disrupted and threatened the very existence of the worlds of southeastern Nigerian women, who regarded themselves as responsible for ensuring the wellbeing and continuity not only of their families but of life itself.

This was particularly evident in the case of taxation. Virtually all British colonial officials were oblivious to the impact taxation would have on the women of the Nigerian southeast, because of British obliviousness to women’s role in sustaining their society. The one British official who was alert to possible problems with the imposition of taxation, Lieutenant-Governor of the Southern Provinces Upton Fitzherbert Ruxton (Sylvia Leith-Ross’s brother), urged Graeme Thomson, the governor-general of Nigeria, not to extend the Native Revenue Ordinance into the southeastern provinces in 1929. Failing that, he requested that additional staff and troops be made available to him in the event that the assessments that would have to be made of the Igbo women preparatory to drawing up a scheme of taxation set off disturbances. When British authorities sent out agents to count the inhabitants of Igbo villages, they were seen by the Igbo people as preparing the ground for the taxation of women, a logical conclusion given that
such counting had preceded the imposition of taxation on Igbo men. More profoundly for Igbo women, “counting”—placing a finite number on thing—froze those “things” in place for perpetuity, precluding any addition to their ranks. Thus, counting women of any particular family meant that there could be no more women added to the family without the subtraction of others; for those charged with seeing to the material needs of the family and with the continuance of life itself, this threat of death through counting could not be tolerated. Those African women of Britons’ deepest desires and fears would soon shed their clothing in protest against the policies of the British and, in numbers too large to be counted, bring their grievances right to the doorsteps of British colonial officials.

“Bush Meeting”. Igbo peoples, Nigeria.
The Twin Traumas of War and Influenza

In 1921, Frederick Lugard, now retired but still an influential member of the Colonial Service, published a review essay in The Edinburgh Review entitled “The Colour Problem.” One of the books in Lugard’s review, The Rising Tide of Colour, by the American Lothrop Stoddard, raised the prospect of “a pan-Coloured alliance for the universal overthrow of the white hegemony at a single stroke, a nightmare of race-war beside which the late struggle in Europe would seem the veriest child’s play,” a possibility Lugard did not dispute. Encouraged by Bolsheviks, who purportedly welcomed miscegenation as a means of bringing about communist revolution, “admixture with alien races” would bring about “the deterioration of the Nordic race-type” and ultimately annihilate the white races. “The union of opposite types, such as the Negro or Australoid with the Nordic,” Lugard noted, explaining Stoddard’s thesis, “rapidly tends to the elimination of the latter, owing to the prepotency of the black race.” As befitting a servant of empire, Lugard took the occasion of the review to pronounce “the true conception of the inter-relation of colour: complete uniformity in ideals, absolute equality in the paths of knowledge and culture, equal opportunity for those who strive, equal admiration for those who achieve,” but, in the realm of the physical and the material, of the social and racial, “a separate path, each pursuing his own inherited traditions, preserving his own race-purity and race-pride.” The danger of annihilation of whites through inter-marriage with blacks necessitated the establishment of “drastic immigration laws.” “Only by rigidly guarding his frontiers, and by restriction of immigration, can he preserve his race purity and save himself from extinction,” Lugard asserted. As we saw in the last chapter, his concern with establishing boundaries designed to keep Africans and Europeans apart from one another was not new in 1921. What was new in the years following the Great War was the association he made of boundary crossing with extinction.

The experiences of the Great War introduced a radically new element to the relations between British colonizers and their subjects, infusing older discourses about race and gender with a highly charged valence. In the interwar years of the twentieth century, racial and gendered transgressions took on a degree of danger they had not hitherto possessed, transforming what might have been regarded as social deaths into the possibility of existential annihilation.

The obsession with miscegenation, the violation of boundaries, and the need to establish barriers to stave off annihilation recalls the accounts by German Freikorps of their campaigns against communists and socialists in the years immediately following the war. The proto-fascist Freikorps member, argued Klaus Theweleit in Male Fantasies, dreaded communism as a source of dissolution of self. Representing a disavowal of distinctions between what is mine and what is yours; an effacing of private possessions, whether material or psychic, in a terrifying, “promiscuous mingling,” communism evoked the very terrors of being swamped, engulfed, and swallowed up posed by the working-class women who populated their writings, women who were virtually synonymous with prostitutes in the minds of the Freikorps. Communism bespoke “the mass,” an amorphous entity without boundaries or borders, into which one...
might sink and never come out again, in the same way that women announced the chaotic, unbounded, uncontrolled disorder of sexual desire and sexual excess. Both threatened the existence of the defined, definite individual self.

Theweleit’s claim that “the alien race appears...to be the most intense embodiment of the terrors represented by the mass” becomes crucial to our understanding of the British response to the Women’s War in 1929, as we will see in Chapter 7. The terrors of the mass could only be neutralized through the invocation of those traits that marked off the British colonial officer from Africans and women, and especially African women. In place of the messy, disorderly, chaotic impulses characterized by southeastern Nigerian women, the imperial Briton posited himself as a defined and structured autonomous individual. Maintenance of his own pure “race seems to protect him from disintegration,” Theweleit argued. Miscegenation, the collapsing of borders separating one race from another inferior one, on the other hand, “would inexorably cause him to disintegrate.” Unable to distinguish boundaries that delineate self from other, fearful that the boundaries that establish the integrity of the self have given way before the onslaught of uncontrollable forces, the “soldier male” of the Freikorps, and we need add, our very own British colonial official, could not counter the threat of disintegration without resort to violence against those forces that so destabilized him.

The shattered subject of postwar Britain

Most of the colonial officers involved in shooting the women at Utu Ekim Ekpo and Opobo in 1929 and the apologists for their actions served in the Great War. Edward Falk, for example, the resident in charge of Calabar province, was captured in Germany in 1914 and placed in a POW camp. We will discuss him more fully below. The assistant commissioner of police at Abak, in Calabar province, Captain Gilbert Blackburne, was on active military duty in Mesopotamia between 1915 and 1918; he became a prisoner of war in 1918, then joined the regular army in 1919 and stayed until 1921. He won the Military Cross for his bravery. Commissioner of Police Captain Edmund Ford led forces of the Nigerian Regiment in 1916 and 1917. During the campaign in German East Africa, he had to be invalided out owing to illness, which devastated all ranks of the Nigerian Regiment. Assistant District Officer Sydney Harvey served in the King’s Royal Rifle Corp from 1915 to 1922. As a 20-year-old second lieutenant, he took shrapnel to his neck and left shoulder, hand, buttocks, and forearm during the battle of the Somme in 1916; two years later, he was “struck by a fragment of shell & received a G.S.W. [gunshot wound, though this is an erroneous characterization of a shrapnel wound]” in his left hand and arm.

District Officer Captain John N. Hill was seconded to the Nigerian Regiment, arriving in East Africa to take part in the battles there on July 1, 1917. District Officer John Jackson was active in the military between 1914–1919; Captain Henry James from 1913–1919. James received a medal for his actions. Charles Lawrence, the colonial secretary for the Southern Provinces of Nigeria, was attached to the Nigerian Regiment between 1917 and 1919. We know from the testimony presented before the Awa Commission that at least some of the officers had also seen action in Ireland and India in the immediate postwar period: Lieutenant Richard Browning of the Third Battalion of the Nigeria Regiment in Ireland and India; Captain Alfred McCullagh of the First Battalion, Nigeria Regiment in Ireland and perhaps India as well. We know that McCullagh saw action in Europe, having won a medal for service there; it is likely that Browning did, too. A. S. Ellis, commandant of the Nigerian Regiment, probably came up through the ranks as a result of his service in the regiment between 1914 and 1918; Lieutenant Governor of the Southern Provinces of Nigeria Cyril Alexander also served in the Nigeria Regiment. Lieutenant-Colonel P. F. Pritchard arrived in Nigeria to serve in the Regiment in 1927; it is unlikely that he could have achieved that rank without prior service during the Great War. He noted that his fellow officers had “15 to
18 years service, were much decorated, but due to the system of promotion then obtaining in the British Army were still subalterns,” strengthening our belief that he, too, had had significant military experience upon his arrival in Nigeria. We suspect, but do not know for sure, that Assistant District Officer Richard Floyer had military experience. Sylvia-Leith Ross was with the French Red Cross during World War I, working in military hospitals throughout the country. Margaret Green may well have been a part of her unit. In fact, of the sixteen colonial or military officers who either gave orders during the Women’s War or themselves confronted the women directly, we can say with certainty that only one of them had not seen military service during the Great War—District Officer Arthur Whitman.

The participation in the Great War of these crucial actors produced in them a particular set of psychological attributes that bore directly on their thinking and behavior during the Women’s War of 1929. For the terrible experiences of World War I introduced a new kind of subjectivity in the west, one best exemplified by the shell-shocked soldier. The victim of a trauma whose scale and scope were unprecedented, whose mind had been shattered by the endless cycles of bombardment, terror, destruction, and death, and whose control over mental and bodily functions was shaky at best, the shell-shocked soldier came to represent the subject of the age. For the “lost generation” and those who followed, shellshock provided the experience by means of which interwar Britons—and here we want to emphasize women as well as men—came to understand their sense of self, a reflection of the phenomenon anthropologist Jean Comaroff has called “cultural ontology.” She asserted that people in particular times and places arrive at various conceptualizations of selfhood that make sense within the circumstances of those times and places, that resonate with the social, economic, political, and cultural practices that prevail.

The sights and experiences of the Great War could not be integrated into the ordinary patterns or meaning systems that organized the regular rhythms of life; in short, they traumatized people. Because traumatic incidents are so overwhelming, so unprecedented, so horrifying in nature, they cannot fit within the narrative structure by means of which we make sense of ourselves and our lives. Instead, such traumas are experienced as disruptions in the narrative stream, as gaps in the stories we use to define ourselves. Most often, victims and observers of or participants in unspeakable incidents attempt to suppress them, to bar their entry into consciousness, but such is the horrific nature of traumatic events that they cannot be fully denied. Memories of them insist on intruding into consciousness, but they do so not as a continuous, intelligible narrative that can be incorporated into one’s recognizable life story, but in fragmented images or sensations that will not fit together to form a whole picture. Without a verbal, linear context into which the trauma can be assimilated and integrated, it will recur over and over again. The inability to construct a coherent narrative of the self in relation to the most extreme traumatic events, noted one scholar, may constitute “the true meaning of annihilation, for when one’s history is abolished, one’s identity ceases to exist as well.” Shellshock promulgated a new sense of “self” and “self-awareness,” compelling the emergence of a new subject, a new subjectivity, one best characterized as “shattered.” Sufferers of shellshock frequently spoke of the fragmentation of their mental processes. An earlier sensation of psychic wholeness, autonomous separateness, continuity, meaning, and attachment had come apart, leaving a felt condition of rupture, disintegration, and shattering that threatened to leave the individual in pieces.

The physical and psychic terrain of the twentieth century was dramatically transformed by the material and emotional traumas suffered during the First World War and its immediate aftermath. The blasted, splintered landscape of the trenches produced by constant shelling and the sight of bodies in pieces provided the imagery through which the state of the mind in the postwar years would be represented and articulated. The term shellshock derived from soldiers’ exposure to massive artillery barrages. Producing extreme levels of ceaseless noise, they bombarded the senses with ear-splitting sound, light that turned night into day, and concussive force that knocked men down. As Ford Madox Ford put it in a letter to his
daughter Katherine in December 1916, he was “blown up by a 4.2 & shaken into a nervous breakdown.” Shells splintered trees and rent the landscape with their destructive force. The physical effects on the surrounding terrain produced by shellfire were consistently depicted in terms that evoked shattering. A Red Cross medic spoke of “fantastically splintered tree stumps,” of shells fading away in “filmy shreds and tatters.” German shells “ripped through the dark copse all about us, bursting in great rose-shaped splashes, green whirling vortices, up-sproutings, scatters and showers of unbearably brilliant flame.” “Fragments of earth and stone tinkled on my helmet,” he told his family. Lieutenant Bernard Pitt described “a sight more shocking than the ruin of human work, a ghastly wood where broken trunks and splintered branches take on weird and diabolical forms.” In a letter to his brother, Lieutenant Christian Carver revealed that “one get certain pictures absolutely engraved on one’s soul...[During shelling], the familiar landscape showed up in fragments now here, now there, lighted by the blinding flash of the guns.”

What artillery did to earth and trees it also did to bodies. “Horses, men, women, and children blown to pieces,” despaired Lance Corporal Harold Chapin to his wife in May 1915, as he recounted his work as a member of the Royal Army Medical Corps. Captain Theodore Wilson spoke in the spring of 1916 of “those poor torn bodies,” of “the deliberate tearing of fine young bodies,” of “that little singing splinter of metal” that wreaked such havoc, of “fine fellows ripped horribly out of existence by ‘reeking shard.’” Private Thomas Dry wrote to his family from Egypt, telling them of his experience digging out his comrades after an attack, describing “pieces of flesh, scalp, legs, tunics tattered and parts of soldiers carried away in blankets.” Captain William Mason told of “the wounded whose flesh and bodies are torn in a way you cannot conceive,” a sight shared by Ford Madox Ford as he watched “men, burst into mere showers of blood, and dissolving into muddy ooze.” Sergeant-Major Frederic Keeling, in a letter to E. S. P. Haynes in March 1916, described his efforts to bring in a man wounded by shellfire. In a telling, if unconscious, association to the state of the soldier’s body, he went on to ask Haynes if he had seen the exhibition of a set of drawings of shelling entitled “Fragments from France.”

These images of fragments, splinters, and shards, of tearing and ripping, carried over to front soldiers’ descriptions of their minds and mental states after too many days of shelling, wounds, and death. As Frederic Manning put it in his novel of the war, Her Privates We, when soldiers went into battle “the world would be shattered for them, and what was left of it they would have to piece together again, into some crazy makeshift that might last their time.” Richard Aldington’s protagonist George Winterbourne in Death of a Hero described trench life as a set of “circumstances which rent his mind to pieces.” He described a particular battle as “a timeless confusion, a chaos of noise, fatigue, anxiety, and horror.” He “did not know how many days and nights it lasted, lost completely the sequence of events, found great gaps in his conscious memory. He did know that he was profoundly affected by it, that it made a cut in his life and personality... . His mind no longer wandered off in long coherent reveries, but was either vaguely empty or thronged with too vivid memories.” Guy Chapman similarly spoke of the days just before the Armistice in terms that evoked the disruption of thought, the gaps in memory that forbade a coherent telling of the experience. “The next six weeks remain in my memory a mere set of disconnected pictures with periods of complete blankness... . The cinematograph flicks past quickly. We had little understanding of the pictures.”

At least five of the officers involved in the Women’s War, having seen action in the Great War in Europe, would have undergone many of the same kinds of traumas depicted above. Indeed, ADO Sydney Harvey was wounded in the course of one of the most horrific battles of the war, and then wounded again two years later. The one British participant for whom we have a detailed account of wartime experience, Edward Falk, was in Germany at the time the war broke out. Incarcerated at Hannover Police Headquarters on August 5, he faced a military court the next day and was sentenced to imprisonment in a military jail for the duration of the war. He sat in solitary confinement for a little over a week, and was
then released after the American ambassador to Germany intervened with German authorities. With a number of other prisoners of war who had also been released, he stayed at Haldsk until November 6, 1914, when German authorities arrested him again. He was kept at police headquarters there with 150 other prisoners, a site he described as “the black hole of Calcutta.” Two days later, after being marched through the streets of Hannover under military guard, he and others boarded a train to Ruhleben Camp outside of Berlin, arriving at about midnight. He was herded into Barracks III, a stable, where he shared Box 8—a stall measuring eleven feet by eleven feet—with five other men. Falk described his experiences in the POW camp as follows: “Terrible cold winter. Nerves very bad due to worry, overcrowding, filth and general humiliations of position. ‘Psychologie de fil de fer.’ Hopeless inactivity… . Conditions improved in the spring but very depressing…. Food conditions not intolerable as described by many, thanks to parcels, but very unpleasant.” Possessed of the psychology of the caged, as the French phrase suggests, he suffered from the kind of nervous disorder that would come to be called shellshock.

Falk remained in the prison camp until July 9, when he and a correspondent for the Chronicle, G. Pyke, managed to escape. They traversed the roughly 300 miles from Berlin to Gronau, on the Dutch border, in two weeks, sometimes disguising themselves as tourists and taking a train, sometimes “tramping” at night guided by a compass and a small map and sleeping in the woods. One night, pouring rain drenched them till they were “wet through;” often they were “very wet, cold and hungry.” On the 15th of July, Pyke fell ill. Falk managed to purchase some food on the 18th in Emsdetten, which seems to have revived them enough to keep going. Pyke collapsed on the 20th, however, as they crossed the “Brechte” moor, a place Falk described as “very wild lonely and uncanny.” The next day they spotted German cavalry near Ochtrup; on the 21st, Falk recounts their almost perishing in a peat moor just outside of Gronau. They were able to cross the Gronau-Bentheim railroad on the night of July 23, and hid out under a tree where two Dutch soldiers discovered them the next day. Safe at last, Falk still had to make the crossing from Zeeland to England, which he did on the 28th, arriving on the 29th “after ‘nervy’ crossing fearing recapture by submarines. This happened to steamer shortly afterwards & two other Zeeland mail boats were mined.” He had had a harrowing trip.

On August 25, 1915, less than a month after he had arrived in London, Falk sailed for Nigeria on the Karina, traveling along the coast of France, Spain, and Portugal with no naval escort. The danger from submarine attack clearly occupied him, as he wrote in his diary that the Karina had subsequently been torpedoed. His work in Nigeria for the next year appears to have been routine, at least for wartime, though there were some risings he had to deal with that arose from British recruitment practices. In January 1917, having contracted some kind of skin ailment, Falk was invalided out of Nigeria. He arrived back in England on the 26th of February, again with submarines on his mind. His own ship had made the voyage safely, but another “vessel reported sunk 50 miles from our own position on night of 19th,” he wrote in his diary. On March 31, he had a reunion with one of his fellow POWs from Box 8.

In early April Falk underwent surgery (for what, we do not know, though it may have had to do with his skin ailment). It was “bungled,” he wrote, leaving him in “much pain.” He was left to recover in a nursing home, where he felt “lonely.” His wife, Helen, arrived on April 10, shortly after the surgery, but he found it a “very sad depressing reunion at nursing home.” A second operation, taking place on the 12th, seems to have been more successful than the first, and on the 14th he was able to leave the nursing home and join Helen. But it was a bad time for them. “Everything in the world going wrong,” he despaired, “very depressed. Helen in a wretched mental condition.” On April 29, 1917, Falk “parted from Helen at Exeter,” having been ordered back to West Africa after only three months leave following a 17-month tour; since November 1914, he had seen his wife for only one week. His wife was “mostly depressed,” he noted, as was the country itself, “feeling strain of long war & ruined finances.”
Before embarking aboard the *Abinsi*, Falk heard reports of “losses of many ships.” Two West African mail boats had been “torpedoed with heavy loss of life.” The ship stopped in Belfast for a time, and when it left on June 2, he was “prepared for the worst.” Long line of trawlers guarding coast. Encountered cruisers at dusk. No lights, no escort. The following day his ship “encountered submarine which did not attack (nationality unknown) & dived before anything done by ‘Abinsi.’”  

Falk does not tell us so in the brief entries he makes to his official diary, but the prospect of being torpedoed by a German U-boat had to have been profoundly distressing. The danger was, indeed, acute: From February 1 to the end of July 1917, Germany had put more submarines to sea than ever before, and it had removed any restrictions on their actions that had curtailed their earlier activities. The last month of restricted U-boat warfare in January 1917 saw the sinking of 171 British, allied, and neutral ships. In February and March, with unrestricted warfare, these losses amounted to 234 and 281, respectively. In April, 373 ships went down at the hands of German torpedoes. In subsequent months, the losses fell just a bit, but that did little to lessen the fears felt by passengers and crew who had to negotiate the dangerous waters of the Atlantic. As Trevor Wilson put it, “for the U-boats’ intended victims, the tension of living for days on end in peril of sudden attack was also powerful. The greatest terror was the prospect of being caught below decks when a torpedo struck.”

We do not have direct testimony from the four Women’s War participants who served in the Nigerian Regiment during the war, but from what we know from others who did, the African campaigns were brutal. For the most part, the kind of warfare they experienced differed from that of the trenches of the western front, but the hardships, losses, and sights and sounds of battle could be just as traumatizing. The deprivations of food and water far surpassed any that soldiers serving in France suffered. The four battalions of the Nigeria Regiment, which comprised about 70% of the West African Frontier Force (WAFF), saw action in the Cameroons in 1914 and 1915, then traveled to East Africa in November 1916 to take part in action against the Germans there. In 1914, 242 British regular officers and 118 British NCOs led 7733 African soldiers in the WAFF. 5426 of those Africans hailed from Nigeria; the same proportion of British officers and NCOs in the Nigerian Regiment would amount to about 250.

The WAFF engaged the Germans in the Cameroons in late August 1914, suffering a decisive defeat under the leadership of an apparently incompetent colonel, C. H. P. Carter. The battle raged for six days, during which the British forces took heavy losses. As a doctor serving with the Nigerian Regiment put it, “it was only when the trenches were piled high with the dead and the position was hopeless that [Lieutenant A. C.] Milne gave the order to charge, and they went through the enemy into the bush. There they mostly managed to evade the Germans and after days of starvation got back to” their base at Ikom. A week later, this same doctor, traveling up river, came across two British survivors of that battle, men who had been in the forest for six days without food. “You never saw two such bedraggled specimens of British officers,” he reported. “They were dirty and torn, but they had smiles on their faces and loaded revolvers in their belts. They had evaded the enemy when they could, shot him when they could not, slept in the dense bush, cut their way at the rate of eight miles a day, swum a river, and finally brought up on British territory and saw our launch approaching. We took them on board, gave them some food, put them in a dingy with some more and sent them down to Ikom.”

The German victory in August meant that both Calabar, the major port in southeastern Nigeria, and the Niger Delta were now vulnerable. The hapless Carter, blamed for the disaster, lost his command and was sent home, replaced by Lieutenant Colonel Frederick Cunliffe. Under the command of Brigadier General Charles Dobell, the WAFF tried again to invade Cameroon, this time finding greater success. In September, it pushed the Germans inland, operating in the most appalling conditions. As Dobell described
it, “all the coastline and for some 150 miles inland, one meets the same monotonous, impenetrable African forest, fringed on the coast by an area of mango swamp in varying depth.” His officers and NCOs wrote home to their families of “hundreds and hundreds of creeks, 200 to 300 yards wide: all the islands soft mud in which alligators [sic] wallow.” “We made a reconnaissance up to our knees in mud,” another reported, “The mangrove swamps are awful,” complained another. “Always wet and hot: temperature 104° F.” “Nearly every night there is a tornado, and the rain comes down in buckets,” recorded one officer not surprisingly, given that Cameroon gets between 150 and 400 inches of rain a year; the months between mid-March and mid-October—just when the WAFF did their fighting there—saw the greatest amount of rainfall. Throw in the millions of tsetse flies and other disease-carrying insects that inhabited the area, and it made for a horrendous campaign, one that the British and their French allies won by 1916, but at great cost to the Nigerian Regiment. Lugard, still governor of Nigeria, requested that the War Office send him forty-two senior officers for the Nigerian Regiment, but received only fifteen Britons of lesser rank, owing to the needs on the western front. The War Office advised him to make up his losses by recruiting from the British living in Nigeria. When asked in 1916 to provide troops for the East African campaign, Lugard hesitated, fearing that he could not maintain security in Nigeria with the staff he had—over a third of his administrative staff had already been siphoned off for war duty. A November 1916 rebellion of Oujo protesting British recruitment practices bore out his concerns, but he acceded to the War Office and dispatched 5,000 troops of the Nigerian Regiment to German East Africa. They established themselves in the Rufiji valley of German East Africa in December, just before the onset of the rainy season.

Conditions in the East African theater wreaked havoc with British troops. As Captain W. A. Downes, an officer in the Nigeria Regiment, wrote in 1919, “before this campaign many men that took part in it did not know what it was to be ill. After a few weeks thousands of these once healthy men returned to the Union [of South Africa] broken in health, not to know for months after leaving East Africa what it was to be really healthy and free from pain. Many will never get over their experiences, whilst again many a strong and healthy man never returned to his native land, but fell a victim to malaria, dysentery, black water, or enteric contracted in German East Africa. I do not know of a more pitiable sight than a man that one has known as once a strong and powerful athlete, brought by sickness and privation to a poor and wretched thing of skin and bone.” Downes estimated that about 80% of the first white troops who fought in East Africa in early 1916 were “no longer fit for active service” after only a few months. Driven mad by driver ants—“more terrible than any German,” exclaimed Downes. “Their power to disturb is immense”—disoriented by their inability to see through thick forests, and menaced by wild animals and plants like “buffalo bean” that irritated their skin unbearably, British officers and NCOs found the situation profoundly difficult.

The rains in the Rufiji valley proved relentless, flooding the entire area and washing out 120 miles of hard-won road within two days. With wheeled transport no longer functioning, supplies had to be brought in by carriers. Twelve thousand of them—the number required to supply 3,000 soldiers—struggled through crocodile-and lion-infested terrain to provide food and ammunition to the troops, who for all the efforts of the carriers received only thirteen ounces of food a day. Fresh meat was unavailable, so soldiers resorted to roots they dug out of the ground, along with animal carcasses whose consumption produced “disastrous results on many occasions.” Men boiled up hides they had removed from bridges in soup, and were served “bush rat pie and monkey’s brains on ration biscuits.” Officers reported that February, March, and April 1917 were “black months for the Nigerian Brigade,” their men being “terribly thin and wretched, till they became almost unfit to take the field in any active operations.” “The hardships passed must be unparalleled in military operations of our time,” wrote Captain W. D. Downes. “Our condition could not have been worse even if we had been in a siege.”
Facing extreme conditions and near starvation, the Nigerian Regiment continued to patrol the area in the spring of 1917, wading through waist- and neck-deep water. Half of the regiment was withdrawn in mid-March, and then attacked by the Germans in what Downes called a “very unpleasant little show.” The attack, on a path considered to be “as safe as any country road in England,” demoralized the troops terribly. One historian noted that “such boldness on the part of the enemy stretched nerves to the limit. So too did the wildlife: the noise of a herd of hartebeest moving past Kibongo at night was indistinguishable from that which might be made by a German patrol.” The remaining Nigerian battalions were ordered to withdraw in April, so dire was the situation and so great the extent of disease. As they ferried across the Rufiji river, a hippo attacked the boat and drowned eleven soldiers. Once across, the path they followed wended its way through swampland filled with crocodiles, and “dead mules and donkeys and even dead carriers littered the road in various degrees of putrefaction.” More than a third of the troops never made it, succumbing to disease and starvation.

One officer commanding Indian troops on the Rufiji front, a man by the name of Thornton, had served earlier in the war in Europe; he compared that situation favorably to his time in East Africa: “What wouldn’t one give for the food alone in France,” he declared. “For the clothing and equipment! For the climate, wet or fine, and above all for the fighting where one knows one is up against the real thing. I am perfectly ready to be killed,” he asserted, “but if that is to happen, please, I want to die a strong man, with all my faculties intact, not a half-starved weakling.”

Clearly, the fighting in Africa produced profound mental stress for British officers, not unlike that found among soldiers on the western front. Downes confessed to depression and admitted that in a number of instances his “nerves had been stretched almost to breaking-point.” And in at least one instance, we find a description of the fighting that used imagery not dissimilar to that we saw being used by soldiers in Europe. The October 1917 battle at Mahiwa, described as the “bloodiest of the entire campaign” in East Africa, looked to observers very like that of the Somme or Paschendaele. “It was a battle of trenches and dugouts, grenades and machine guns,” explained one historian, “of bayonet charges, of blood, mud and all the classic features of World War I as practiced on the Western Front in Europe.” (Even the commander of allied troops, Brigadier-General Gordon Beves, behaved in the classic, unimaginative and deadly way demonstrated by his western front counterparts. Ordering a deadly frontal attack on German forces who were expecting it, Beves sent his men to their death in the thousands. More than half of the British forces, 2,700 out of 4,900, died.) Captain Downes declared that the effects of the shelling incurred by the Nigerian Regiment at Mahiwa were worse than those suffered on the western front. He described what happened to officers and troops who had no shelter to retreat to, no means of taking cover when they were bombarded by German shells. “Every direct hit found its human target; the trees above this trench were dripping blood for two days afterwards from limbs and trunks of men that had been blown up and been wedged between the branches.” Because the shelling finally “began to tell upon the morale of the men,” the troops were ordered back, but “the whole of this part of the line,” he recounted, “was littered with broken and wounded men trying to crawl back to the dressing station.” Another British officer, Captain Angus Buchanan of the Royal Fusiliers, described what happened to his unit at Lindi while it was engaged in covering the retreat of British forces. The men “fought till they were cut to pieces,” he wrote. Pieces of broken bodies blown apart by shelling—these were images that could easily have been taken from the western front.

Much of what we understand about the nature of shellshock—post-traumatic stress disorder—derives from the testimony of World War I veterans, front soldiers who witnessed and experienced the singular terrors of that war. But it was not only combat soldiers who reeled under the impact of the great conflict. Just as the condition of shellshock revealed that men could become hysterical—that is, like women—the events of the war demonstrated that women, like soldiers, could be shellshocked. Non-combatants shared the devastation and sense of loss experienced by men on the battlefield, though perhaps not with the same
intensity or degree of horror. Nurses, members of the Voluntary Aid Detachments (VADs), and ambulance drivers, all of them attending wounded soldiers, confronted fearsome sights, sounds, and smells and faced the kinds of events, sights, and emotional assaults that might traumatize even the most steady of individuals.

Veterans continued to experience traumatic symptoms well into the 1920s. Many could not throw off the sights and sounds of the war, and suffered nightmares and flashbacks for months and even years. “Shells used to come bursting on my bed at midnight,” recounted Robert Graves, even though his wife, “Nancy shared it with me; strangers in daytime would assume the faces of friends who had been killed.” The sound of a car backfiring “would send me flat on my face, or running for cover,” while lectures he attended at Oxford were often interrupted by scenes of battle. These flashbacks continued through 1928. Ford Madox Ford walked around feeling that “all things that lived and moved and had volition and life might at any moment be resolved into a scarlet viscosity seeping into the earth of torn fields.”

Returning soldiers, nurses, and ambulance drivers could not control their emotions; they felt hysterical, overwhelmed. Bonded to one another through a literal ordeal of fire, these men (and some women) shared emotions and experiences that no one who had not been through the war could understand, they believed. Leaving those comrades for peacetime existence produced a sense of disconnection from anything meaningful, and often produced a sense of alienation and atomization that plagued many veterans. Herbert Read recognized that “the sense of unity and of unanimity” fostered by the war could not survive demobilization, bemoaning the fact that “all that comradeship was to vanish once the storm was over” and soldiers returned to civilian life as “demobilized particles.” Guy Chapman found that the men of his battalion “had become so much a part of me that its disintegration would tear away something I cared for more dearly than I could have believed. I was it, and it was I.” Upon demobilization, he felt that “the whole of our world was crumbling,” “our civilization was being torn in pieces before our eyes.” The imagery of fragmentation and dissolution peppered their accounts of postwar life.

Veterans, men and women alike, found that the society to which they returned could not or would not embrace them with the respect and dignity they believed their sacrifices had earned them. Some two-thirds of the unemployed in the early 1920s had been members of the armed forces. Out of work, finding it difficult to adapt to civilian life, these one-time heroes were now “returned soldiers,” “a problem to their country, if not a bore,” as Irene Rathbone noted. They “were a nuisance, and even a menace to everybody whose job was uncertain,” declared Richard Aldington, decrying the public’s “indifference verging on hostility towards the men of the returning army.” Where once “you were the savior of your country,” now “you were a rotter who had acquired habits of idleness and insobriety in the King’s service.” Veterans especially resented the apparent failure of postwar society to appreciate the nature of those sacrifices, to ask them to go about their lives as if no traces of the wounds of war existed. The sense that civilians had forgotten and betrayed the sacrifices made by soldiers plagued many veterans, whose fury sometimes flared into uncontrollable rage. When Aldington learned of the desecration of skulls at Verdun, he “knew what it was to feel murder in one’s heart,” a situation, he believed, that “supplied the material from which fascists were made” on the continent. He feared no such danger in England, but in comparing the “unnecessary bitterness and misery” caused by the country turning its back on its returning vets to “the more acute form” of it on the continent, Aldington suggested that the difference was one of degree, not kind. Charles Carrington put it more pointedly, declaring baldly that “all the elements that produced the phenomenon of fascism in Italy and German were at work in the other belligerent countries.” This rage could—and in some instances, did—explode in violence, as was the case in the race riots in the summer of 1919 and in individual acts of assault committed by demobilized soldiers. Carrington described the “love for ganging-up with the other boys, a craving to demonstrate one’s manliness, and a delight in anti-social violence” characteristic of returned soldiers, including himself. Philip Gibbs
believed that the “dreadful crimes, of violence and passion” on the part of soldiers or ex-soldiers that filled the newspapers derived from the hatred for the Germans instilled by four years of war, but we should probably understand the rage that “surge[d] up when there are no Germans present, but some old woman behind an open till, or some policeman…or in a street riot where fellow-citizens are for the time being ‘the enemy’” as manifestations of post-traumatic stress disorder.25

This rage, we suggest, should be seen as an effort to stave off the unbearable feelings of people whose psyches feel shattered, who experience their states of mind as being in pieces, fragmented. For such individuals, the boundaries of their psyches—sometimes, indeed, their whole selves—are experienced as unstable, fluid, incapable of keeping out forces that might overwhelm them. As one theorist put it, they suffer from the sensation that their psyches are vulnerable to drives that threatened to annihilate it. The ego then acts as a kind of armor designed to stave off the sensation of the mind in pieces, to protect against the chaotic forces that might reduce the subject to fragmentation and dissolution. Those forces might be internal or external: they might be conscious or unconscious sexual desires, or racial, sexual, gendered, or political “others.”26 This shattered subject armored against dissolution reflects the traumas induced by the conditions and experiences of violence, death, and loss. It is an aggressive subject, whose very existence may depend on inflicting injury and even death upon those “others” who so threaten his or her psychic and bodily integrity. C. Fred Alford has argued in this regard that “hatred is egostructuring. It can define a self, connecting it to others, anchoring it in the world, while at the same time acting as a fortress.”27

Much of the violence exhibited by veterans, whether rhetorical or physical, targeted women, those gendered or sexualized “others” who so threatened the psyches of traumatized postwar subjects. Accounts of sexual attacks upon women filled the columns of newspapers. Gibbs reported that “the daily newspapers for many months have been filled with the record of dreadful crimes, of violence and passion. Most of them have been done by soldiers or ex-soldiers.” He was struck by the “brutality of passion, a murderous instinct, which have been manifested again and again in…riots and street rows and solitary crimes. These last are the worst because they are not inspired by a sense of injustice, however false, or any mob passion, but by homicidal mania and secret lust. The murders of young women, the outrages upon little girls, the violent robberies that have happened since the demobilizing of the armies have appalled decent-minded people.” The Vote, explaining “Why Carriages Reserved for Women are Needed,” reported that “a young soldier, described in court as a desperate and dangerous man, was charged with assaulting a girl, aged 16, a domestic servant, in a railway carriage…he sprang at her and caught her by the throat…the accused said…he would have ‘done her in.’”

Gibbs blamed “the seeds of insanity in the brains of men” on the “abnormal life of war” and on women who gave them venereal disease. In this version, the war and women become confused. “Sexually [the men] were starved,” he argued. “For months they lived out of the sight and presence of women. But they came back into villages or towns where they were tempted by any poor slut who winked at them and infected them with illness. Men went to hospital with venereal disease in appalling numbers. Boys were ruined and poisoned for life.” The return of the soldier to a Britain in which women played a much larger role in politics and the economy than ever before was seen to pose a serious threat to the stability of the country, marked by disorder in virtually every realm of life—political, social, economic, and personal.28

Political disorder appeared, for many, as a threatening consequence of the new franchise enacted in the 1918 Representation of the People Act, which established universal manhood suffrage and gave women over thirty the vote. The age requirement ensured that women would not enjoy a majority over men, whose numbers had been greatly reduced in the slaughter of war; fears of women “swamping” men at the polls loomed over the debate. Moreover, the age restriction ensured that those eligible to vote were likely to be wives and mothers; those excluded were largely single, unattached women who had made so
significant a contribution to the war effort, who might seek to continue their work after the war and even to sacrifice marriage and motherhood to do so. The sexual disruption these women represented produced acute anxiety in the postwar years. The new electorate, comprised of newly emancipated women and, seemingly, of frightening, angry, out of work demobilized soldiers, alarmed a good part of society.

Socially, Britain appeared to be a new world altogether. During the war, women had joined the workforce in unprecedented numbers, taking jobs as munitions workers, agricultural laborers, tram conductors, ambulance drivers, frontline nurses, and, finally, after the disasters of 1916, auxiliary soldiers. The dismantling of barriers between men’s and women’s work and the evident joy women experienced in their new roles fostered a blurring of distinctions that had helped to form traditional versions of gender identity. Mrs. Alec-Tweedie, for example, rejoiced in the fact that by the events of the war, “women have become soldiers.” Moreover, she predicted, it might not be long before “we may have to have women fighters too.” In this context, it is not surprising that anxiety about the war frequently took shape as anxiety about sex, or was articulated in sexual terms; as the war effort worsened attacks on women, and especially on women’s sexuality, increased. Women who labored in the munitions factories and served in the auxiliary forces excited adverse comment; many implied that their earnings came from working an “extra shift,” by which they meant prostitution. Siegfried Sassoon’s autobiographical Sherston told of his Aunt Evelyn complaining of “the disgracefully immoral way most of the young women were behaving while doing war work.” Before they even reached France, members of the Women’s Auxiliary Army Corps were accused of loose living and of corrupting the morals of “our poor lads.” Making no distinction between prostitutes infected with venereal diseases on the one hand, and young girls or women infected with “khaki fever” on the other, Arthur Conan Doyle wrote to The Times in February 1917 of “vile women…who prey upon and poison our soldiers…these harpies carry off the lonely soldiers to their rooms…and finally inoculate them…with one of those diseases.” A December 1917 letter to The Times referred to women as “sexual freelancers” who “stalked through the land, vampires upon the nation’s health, distributing and perpetuating among our young manhood diseases which institute a national calamity.” In July 1918, Imperial War Conference attendees heard tales of infected women “lying in wait for clean young men who came to give their lives for their country.” The government, for its part, introduced regulation 40d of the Defense of the Realm Act in March 1918, at the height of worries about the German advance, declaring that “no woman suffering from venereal disease shall have sexual intercourse with any member of His Majesty’s Forces, or solicit or invite any member to have sexual intercourse with her.” Clearly, in the minds of many Britons, sex presented as great a threat to the survival and existence of England as did Germany; the two were, indeed, conflated in the minds of many. Mrs. Alec-Tweedie made this connection abundantly clear when she warned that “every woman who lets herself ‘go’ is as bad as a German spy, and a traitor, not only to her sex, but to her country.” These were visions of sexuality in which women had become fully as unrestrained as men, threatening traditional gender and sexual arrangements. In communities where migrants from the West Indies, Africa, the Mideast, and South Asia contributed to war work, racial fears exacerbated the potential for gender disorder.

Something like the blurring of gender lines that took place during the war continued afterwards, as young women of virtually ever class—called, derisively, “flappers”—dressed in boyish fashions, cut their hair short, smoked cigarettes, drove cars, and generally pursued an active, adventurous lifestyle. Their counterparts, the “bright young things,” men who had been too young to go to war in the years 1914–1918, offered themselves as effeminate contrasts, till it appeared, in the popular press at least, that young men and women had simply switched roles, characteristics, and styles with one another. Boyish women and effeminate men dominated the fashion pages of newspapers and magazines, representing the carefree, youth-oriented, pleasure-seeking, even hedonistic nature of the postwar generation sick and tired of a devastating war to which they had been unable to make a contribution; for others they constituted proof
that society was in a complete state of disorder—disorder represented in gendered and sexualized terms. As we will see in Chapter 7, sexual disorder haunted the men who confronted the women of the Ogu, heightened by a racial component that rendered it intolerable.

“A kind of death coming from across the salty waters”30

The twin traumas of war and influenza brought profound and extended disruption to the peoples of southeastern Nigeria as well, though we lack the sources to offer as finely gauged an analysis of their changes in mentalité as we have for Britons. Only a month after hostilities broke out in Europe, Nigerian troops and laborers were required to fight the Germans in the Cameroons; in 1917, they provided a significant portion of the forces committed to the East Africa campaigns. By the fall of 1918, some 17,000 Nigerian soldiers and 37,000 carriers, most of them impressed, had served in the British actions against the Germans. Thousands more had been pressed into service within Nigeria and along its borders.31 Consonant with British views about the “manliness” of the northern Nigerians and the messy femininity of the southern Nigerians, Governor Lugard restricted conscription into the military forces to the “fighting races” of the north; mere carriers were to come from the peoples of the south, the forcible impressment of whom he ordered in late 1914.32 When Yoruba men failed to sustain their recruiting numbers midway through the war, British officials sought in late 1916 to recruit Igbo men as combatants. Few complied, however, with only about 200 Igbo men enlisting as of April 1917 (by July, almost half of these had deserted the ranks).33

Described as “volunteers” in official correspondence, carriers could only be obtained in sufficient numbers through intimidation, threats, and kidnapping. West Africans regarded carrier work with disdain, even when paid for it, characterizing it as “donkey work.” They avoided it unless economic circumstances or physical force compelled them to comply. One western Nigerian official recounted in 1915 that “I have evidence that, in the past, men have invariably been compelled to serve as carriers…. On all sides I hear of charges of extortion and oppression…. It is possible, also, that harsh treatment in the past may have caused an added distaste for such work. An English officer has recently told me in confidence that he has known of instances of carriers being put in prison for three or four days at a certain station to prevent them going away.”34 The dangers and harsh treatment involved in military-carrying rendered the work completely unattractive; British officials had to threaten chiefs to produce carriers for the Cameroonian and East African campaigns. Chiefs, in turn, forced their villagers to “enlist” in the carrier corps, an abuse of their power that constituted perhaps the greatest grievance against the warrant chief system. According to historian James K. Matthews, “it was during the war that the warrant chief system earned the infamy it never overcame. In southern Nigeria, resistance to wartime military recruitment…should be viewed, at least partially, as a protest against unpopular rulers and the British who kept them in power.”35

One southern Nigerian recruit, Nwose (an Igbo, we believe, on the basis of his name), told of his experience:

We came back one night from our yam farm. The chief called us and handed us over to a Government messenger. I did not know where we were going to, but the chief and the messenger said that the white man had sent for us and so we must go. After three days we reached the white man’s compound. Plenty of others had arrived from other villages far away. The white man wrote our names in a book, tied a brass number ticket around our neck, and gave each man a blanket and food. Then he told us that we were going to the great war to help the King’s soldiers, who were preventing the Germans coming to our country and burning it. We left and marched far into the bush. The Government police led the way, and allowed no man to stop behind.36

Carriers faced difficult conditions and suffered harsh treatment at the hands of their masters. Wholly apart from their vulnerability to sniping by the enemy, carriers experienced hardships of the most extreme kind. While soldiers wore uniforms and carried equipment issued by the British, carriers had no such
protection from the elements until late in the war. They went barefoot throughout, and received only a kernel sack for protection from the rains in the Cameroons and East Africa. Food was scarce and disease rates high for both troops and carriers, but carriers received the least attention in these matters. In the Cameroons, half of the 14,000 carriers fell ill with leg and foot ulcers, respiratory and stomach ailments, malaria, and illnesses described as “debility” and “wasting.” W. A. Downes reported that carriers working in the flooded Rufiji valley were attacked and killed or mutilated by crocodiles as they trod paths where the water was waist deep. Authorities recorded 515 deaths among the Cameroons carriers, but even they conceded that this number “certainly” undercounted the actual numbers. Overworked, inadequately clothed and fed, lacking cooking pots and even blankets, carriers fell prey to disease in enormous numbers, a situation that prompted one Colonial Office member to remark, “Of course before the end of the East African campaign…the rate of mortality in East Africa only stopped short of a scandal because the people who suffered most were the carriers—and after all, who cares about native carriers?” The Southern Nigeria Carrier Corps suffered a death rate in East Africa of 394 per thousand; after nine months, 63% of its ranks had been lost to death, injury, or disease. When placed against the figures for the Northern Nigerian Corps or for Sierra Leoneans, these numbers jump out at the reader: the death rate for northern Nigerian carriers stood at 83 per 1,000, while that of Sierra Leoneans was 174 per thousand. At least one British officer who commanded Igbo carriers suggested that the high mortality rate among his charges could be traced to the poor treatment they received. We have seen above the conditions encountered by the Nigerian Regiment in East Africa, where disease and starvation took a hideous toll on Nigerian soldiers and carriers. Lugard described carriers of the Nigeria Brigade who had gone out to East Africa as “a fine body of men;” upon their return in 1917, he lamented, “it is like a collection of half-broken skeletons.”

Those invalided out returned to little better conditions in Nigeria. Lugard admitted in 1917 that carriers—“obviously in a bad state of health”—who landed in Lagos found themselves “without definite care or supervision.” He and others persuaded military officials that a camp for demobilized Nigerians should be built, but little progress was made. The acting commandant of the Nigeria Regiment, Colonel F. Jenkins, lamented that “neither the roofs nor walls of the shelter erected afford any protection from the weather. It would be quite impossible to quarter any human beings least of all invalids in these shelters.” To add injury to injury, soldiers and carriers went without pay for months and months, and often lost promised leave time or payment settlements; troops did not receive the pensions, gratuities, and honors they had been promised at the beginning of the conflict. One ex-private recalled that “the Government did not care about the families…did not even take care of living soldiers…The British could not be trusted.”

The loss of recruits to the military and carrier services imposed severe hardships on families and communities throughout southeastern Nigeria. Large-scale impressment of carriers left a shortage of workers for industry and agriculture; the absence of men in the local villages created greater responsibilities for women. Forced labor generated anxiety and anger within the local population for other reasons as well, leaving many people with the belief that a return to slavery was in the offing. District Officer Falk wrote from Owerri in 1919 that “relatives of men who have not come back from military expeditions or railway work invariably consider the chiefs who recruited the men to be guilty of a species of homicide or slave dealing.” Falk’s Igbo and Ibibio interlocutors connected railway building with the British military’s use of local men, and, indeed, the colonial government began to exploit the coal resources of Enugu and build the railways to supply the British war effort during World War I. For Igbo-speaking peoples, the exploitation and disappearance of manpower for foreign military purposes suggested a darker, cosmological design. Many believed that men who sold their services for warfare engaged in abominations against the earth. Colonial policies, whatever their rationale from the
British perspective, appeared to spread abomination indiscriminately throughout the land, prompting the outbreak of a series of rebellions against the agents of British rule in 1914 and 1915. The British suppressed these with considerable violence: in the so-called “Owerri massacre,” for instance, they retaliated with the destruction of two towns and the killing of an undetermined number of people in the fall of 1914; in 1915, British officials, traders, and local police slaughtered 200 Igbo men who had rebelled against their forced labor on the railroad and killed government workers and supervisors. This was but one of at least twelve counter-insurgency campaigns carried out by the British against the Igbo that year, during which they burned houses and whole villages, beating elderly men who acted as village representatives.

By the time the Great War was winding towards its end in 1918, southeastern Nigerian people had been finally “pacified,” at least on the surface. One of Felix Ekechi’s aged Owerri informants suggested that fourteen years of the “disastrous wars of the whiteman” had destroyed Igbo men’s will to continue the armed warfare that had characterized the initial colonial encounter. The British troops’ weapons had been consistently superior; the punishments for resistance severe; and men’s strength (ike, an important aspect of Igbo masculinity) was depleted. It was at this low moment in the collective psyche of southeastern peoples that something even worse struck the population, what the Igbo would come to call ifelunza or otikpokpo, the influenza pandemic of 1918–1919.

Influenza, with all its attendant horrors—including rapid lethality, great morbidity among young, otherwise healthy people, and its characteristic heliotropic cyanosis—arrived in Lagos during September of 1918 on board the S. S. Bida, which had previously called at the infected port of Freetown, Sierra Leone. After Lagos began to fall to the disease, frightened Africans dispersed along the line of rail and over the roads so recently built by forced labor all throughout the southern interior, including into the southeast. At the same time, more infected people—Europeans and Africans alike—disembarked from ships in other southeastern coastal cities and some began to come down the Niger from the north, finding their way to Onitsha and other river ports along the way.

Rumors circulated among indigenous southeasterners that this deadly illness, striking down the youthful and strong everywhere it appeared, was a by-product of colonial modernity. Susan Martin noted, for instance, the astute observation of Ibiono people in the Ikot-Ekpene area (which would later be the scene of one of the most significant incidents in the Ogu Umunwaanyi) that “the Motors were breeding the sickness.” Ibiono people also commented at least indirectly on the war effort and the rising costs of commodities associated with that effort by suggesting that German shelling had poisoned tobacco stores with influenza. Under the influence of persistent rumors about mass death among Europeans throughout the colony, people in Ikot-Ekpene demonstrated against the court messengers and other local colonial collaborators, hoping to throw off their yoke.

By December 1918, the pandemic, already known in Igbo-speaking areas as ifelunza or otikpokpo, and by other names among other linguistic groups, caused mass death throughout the southeast. Ifelunza struck rapidly, causing its victims to suffer extreme respiratory distress, culminating in a bluish color even in the dark skinned face that all too often presaged death by a form of suffocation. Ohadike provided some mortality numbers, cautioning that these may represent what are, in many cases, wild undercounts:

In the Southern provinces the incidence was...heavy. In Benin Province alone, 15,000 died. In Ogoja Province 63,000 died, while in Owerri Province over 41,000 lives were lost. An official report confirmed that ‘out of a population of nine million at least a quarter of a million died from influenza in the Southern Provinces of Nigeria during the Epidemic’. 

(We would argue that these figures are particularly significant as these last two provinces were particularly implicated in the Ogu Umunwaanyi to come.) While colonial officials reported that “women suffered less than men” in the pandemic, they also noted that there was greater morbidity among pregnant
women than in the female population more generally. This demographic fact resonates with women’s contentions later, first in the Nwaobiala and then in the Ogu, that pregnant women were perceived as the targets of all that had gone wrong in the land—that the “trees that bear fruit,” in their own rhetoric, were seen as particularly vulnerable to the social transformations and traumas associated with British rule, including the new killer, ifelunza/otikpokpo.

Extreme male morbidity was also of central concern to southeastern women, for—as we have noted above in relation to forced labor and collective punishment—women once again bore the brunt of extra work associated with the pandemic. In the generality of Igbo and other southeastern households, women cared for the sick and the dying almost exclusively. While the majority of healer-diviners (ndi dibia in Igbo) were men, and they were called upon to provide medicines (ogwu) and divinatory revelations for people afflicted with otikpokpo, most indigenous men’s relationship with the disease was to sicken and die or to sicken and survive. When men died, married women were expected to prepare their corpses for burial and to undergo at least some of the privations of widowhood on top of their own illness and grief. If men survived and convalesced, married women would be expected to take care of them as well as any children that might have survived, while also maintaining their household duties.

Women were also expected, during this oge ifelunza, to take on the responsibilities of cultivation when men could not work. Ohadike has suggested that this experience of the flu may well have been one reason for the new prevalence of cassava cultivation throughout Igboland. Cassava could be more easily cultivated, the tubers could—unlike the more perishable yam—stay in the ground for a period of up to four years, and it was not attached, in the gendered ideologies of southeastern Nigerian societies, to any particular gender. Planting cassava lessened the work load on men at a moment when they were even more incapacitated than women; however, it did anything but lessen the workload on women, since now women could be expected to clear cassava farms, plant and harvest the tubers as well as engage in the arduous work of gari preparation, the dried and powdered form of the new starch staple. We will hear more below about what seems to have been a simmering resentment felt by women in relationship to this new cultivar, which was not put aside in favor of the local yam varieties once southeastern indigenous men began to recover from the ifelunza but instead came to dominate the emerging cuisine of colonized southeastern Nigeria.

Even though the influenza pandemic ran its course in southeastern Nigeria, as it did throughout most of the world, by mid-1919, it left its marks in indigenous consciousness—being more traumatic, in many ways, than the Great War itself. So significant an event was the flu epidemic in the lives of southeastern Nigerian peoples that, as several historians and anthropologists have noted, Igbo age grades were named after it, and indeed that the otikpokpo/ifelunza became a tupu or oge, a recognized marker of time used to delineate one era from another. Even after it appeared to have been forgotten, those women who survived, along with their daughters, lived with the consequences—by becoming early widows in a region where societies were highly suspicious of widowhood; by having to work at starch staple cultivation, which had once been men’s strict province; and by feeling a sense of failed cosmological responsibility towards the Ala/Ani (the earth goddess), who was clearly expressing her displeasure in signs that must have seemed unmistakable to those with the understanding to read them. Ohadike mentioned the “numerous oral testimonies collected by the present author at various settlements on the lower Niger” in the 1970s and 1980s about the flu epidemic (though, frustratingly, he neglected to recount them in the article he published on the pandemic). One recent informant from the village of Nise in Anambra state (between Onitsha and Enugu) recalled that

my grandmother and other elders in my village recounted the influenza story to us when we were growing up. From all accounts, it was a very devastating disease that killed countless people. As I was told, my late auntie was born when this disease was ravaging my town and environs. My grandmother had to live in the ‘agu’ (a farmstead that’s far away from the village) with her to ensure her survival.
Other mothers took similar steps to avoid this terrible white-man disease. As expected, it turned out that people’s age (and other events that took place in my town) were linked to whether they were born (or took place) before, during and after the influenza epidemic. And so, when my auntie died, it was not difficult for us to calculate her true age. We used 1919 since the disease arrived in my town later than it started overseas.

Novelist Buchi Emecheta placed the flu epidemic at the center of her mother’s story, The Slave Girl, published in 1977. Indeed, the narrative follows a trajectory that leads from the death of the protagonist’s (Ojebeta’s) parents from “Felenza” to the destruction of family bonds to the selling of Ojebeta into slavery by her feckless brother. Ojebeta is bought and brought up by a prosperous trader named Ma Palagada, who in the course of the novel protests against the taxation of women and helps to organize a women’s war that breaks out in Aba. Upon Ma’s death from illness during the “Aba riot, when the market women rebelled against being taxed,” as Emecheta put it, Ojebeta becomes freed and returns to her village. She is welcomed warmly by the inhabitants, one of whom, a very old woman, remarks that Obejeta’s kin “will be glad to know that felenza did its worst but did not kill off all our people.” The narrative thread literally carries the action of the novel from the devastation of kinship and community by disease, to slavery, to protest against British taxation, to women’s war, to freedom from domestic slavery, to a return to home and a mature women’s marital responsibilities—opening and closing with reference to the “felenza.” Emecheta learned about the epidemic at her mother’s knee, and while we cannot claim the novel for historical “fact” (she had the flu breaking out in 1916, for example), we must see in it traces of the powerful, lingering influence exerted by the influenza epidemic on southeastern Nigerian peoples, especially women, down to the most recent decades.

From the start, Nigerians attributed the epidemic to the British, Emecheta calling it “the white man’s death. They shoot it into the air, and we breathe it in and die.” This was a disease unlike others such as smallpox, to which Nigerians were accustomed. It fell men in their fields with virtually no warning. “Death was always so sudden that the relatives were too shocked to cry,” noted Emecheta. Families and communities suffered its ravages, sometimes whole villages succumbing to death; if Emecheta’s narrative plausibly represents the situation, the mortality wrought by the epidemic had the effect of undermining long-held kin and community responsibilities, contributing to social disintegration, the effects of which, we argue, fell disproportionately on women. Ohadike argued that coming as it did on the heels of war-induced food shortages and the increased burdens of imperialism, “the epidemic dealt the final blow to the people’s resistance to external rule.” We take issue with this assertion, insofar as it includes women in its purview. For it was precisely the failure of Igbo men to respond to the depredations of colonialism that compelled women to take the actions they did in the Nwaobiala and the Ogu to address the abominations brought about by colonial and colonized men, to right the cosmos and to try to return their world to health and sustainability.

The “moral tonic” of taxation

Britain emerged from the Great War victorious but broke. Having liquidated its overseas investments in order to pay for the war; having lost overseas and colonial markets to the United States and Japan while occupied fighting Germany; saddled with outdated machinery and plant throughout its industrial north, the country began to slip into depression as early as 1920. Efficiencies in all areas of government were called for, but nowhere did the need to economize appear as markedly as in the imperative to “make the colonies pay for themselves.” Colonial administrators cut costs where they could, but in most cases they balanced their books by increasing tax revenues.

In Nigeria in 1927, against the advice of local Igbo elders, some warrant chiefs, and even a few British officials better versed than most in the ways of Igbo life, the British chose to impose direct taxation on
Igbo men. Under Lugardian policies, native treasuries were to be established to provide money for the maintenance of public works such as roads and to shore up the dignity of the warrant chiefs, who would ultimately be given control over the funds. British authorities also believed, as Afigbo pointed out, that "taxation forced people to work thereby stimulating industry and production which benefited the people with the 'moral tonic' of industry and increased colonial income from export."65 As we have seen, until 1927 a system of corvée labor had existed in the colonized Nigerian southeast, which was administered with many abuses by the warrant chiefs and their entourage. This system, however, at least had the advantage of being intelligible to the local population, even if its abuses caused a long-standing discontent. Taxation, on the other hand, was not a concept with which the Igbo and most other southeastern Nigerians were familiar, and it ran exactly counter to important aspects of their world view: according to Igbo thought, for instance, land could never be alienated, so why should it be paid for, especially to strangers who could never be ndiala (owners/ husbands of the land)? Afigbo has shown, for example, that no indigenous terms existed to express taxation as it is known in the west. Instead, the notion of taxation was expressed to Igbo-speaking people

as either ‘tax on head’ or ‘tax on land’ which with further amplification meant ‘ransom’ or ‘land rent’ respectively. Seen in this light taxation raised the question of how a free man could be required to pay a ransom on his head or how a stranger could ask for rent on land from the sons of the soil. This was a question which nobody could answer but the conservatives were sure that such a demand as taxation which had these implications was irreligious and unethical.66

Moreover, since no tax could be taken without some census data being compiled, indigenous notions about counting people militated in favor of a rejection of direct taxation. Igbo-speaking people, for example, believed that counting human beings could cause death, a conviction that explains why the census was taken far more seriously by certain portions of the Igbo population than the British could have imagined. “Counting, it was believed,” Afigbo pointed out, “reminded evil spirits that a particular kin-group had multiplied beyond a certain point and that the time had come to prune it.”67 Igbo-speakers well understood counting, particularly in the reckoning of debts; the Igbo possess a complex, indigenous numeral system and even have a phrase to express the idea of “infinity.” It was the counting of human beings that was looked upon with dread—and a head tax seemed even more abominable still when conceptualized as somehow paying a ransom for living on the land that had historically belonged to one’s lineage or clan.

Disregarding, then, the warnings of wiser heads, colonial administrators organized a census of men and their property, taking pains to give out as little real information about their intentions as possible. District officers, however, soon found that they and their surrogates were making little progress with the counts, often having to resort to estimation to make deadlines set by their superiors. John Jackson of the Asa native court, under the pressure of such a deadline, was ultimately forced to “assume one male for every three doors in the compound.”68 Other administrators were met with locked doors and an absolute refusal on the part of local warrant chiefs to render them any assistance. Although prepared for violent outbreaks throughout the southeastern provinces in response to the census, the government instead found itself faced with a highly suspect count and no other recourse but to try to collect taxes based upon it. As Gailey put it, “resistance to the initial taxation was certainly uniform in most of the East but it was a silent, nearly hopeless resistance.”69

Authorities compiled their tax rolls from the problematic census and implemented the first direct taxation in southeastern Nigeria in 1928. The tax amounted to 5 shillings per adult male. Although higher colonial officials judged it eminently fair, Igbo men found such a sum difficult to pay. Most indigenous southeastern Nigerians had limited access to British currency, and colonial tax collectors would accept no local substitute—such as cowries, manillas or brass rods—for hard currency. Although sterling had been
introduced to Igboland as the official currency as early as 1902, resistance to it continued in the hinterlands, where it was worth little and only rarely seen. Even those traders who travelled to the large market towns like Onitsha and sold their produce in return for British coin often turned immediately to money-changers to trade the unfamiliar currency for cowries or other local forms, and at a highly unfavorable rate of exchange. “The firms paid for produce in silver coins and currency notes,” explained Ekejiuba, “but since these had no value for the producers, they were quite willing to accept half the value of the new currency in exchange for the old.”70 As Igbo people had little access to this sort of long-distance trading at any rate, many men resorted to borrowing money to pay the tax.

During the Aba Commission’s sessions it was repeatedly alleged that village men borrowed sterling from the warrant chiefs at exorbitant rates of interest to pay the tax, or were forced to pawn members of their families to get hold of cash. Either alternative was a bad one, and most households were brought closer to impoverishment by the imposition of direct taxation. Although taxation did not fall directly upon women, their minor children, or their property in 1928, many women were, in fact, forced to contribute to the revenues collected to pay the men’s taxes. Women involved in trade with some access to outside currency and widows—who often were called on to help their unmarried sons pay their tax, and who, as we have seen, were more numerous on the ground after the oge ifelunza—found themselves particularly burdened. Women’s invisible (to the administration) contributions to the first tax therefore played a large part in their demonstrations later, during the events of 1929. However, women did not wait until 1929, and the introduction of direct taxation, to begin to question colonialism and the troubling state of the land after the Great War and the influenza pandemic. Events that unfolded four years before the outbreak of the Ogu Umunwaanyi in many ways presaged the larger movement to come, and it is to those events—and British colonial misunderstandings of them—that we now turn.

“Road to Nobi. Onitsha” Igbo peoples, Nigeria.
The Nwaobiala of 1925

The (selective) forgetting of 1925

During a session of the Aba Commission of Inquiry’s hearings on the Women’s War of 1929, Kenneth A. B. Cochrane, then the district officer of Ahoada, was asked to comment on southeastern Nigerian women’s organizational abilities. This issue much perplexed colonial officials in Nigeria and London, since it seemed incredible to them that women could organize mass rallies and demonstrations without the instigation and assistance of men. Cochrane replied that the Ogu “proved they were able to organise, which was a thing that was doubted to a certain extent before.” 1 This bald statement seems peculiar when we consider that the same man had been a colonial officer in the Nigerian southeast since 1915 and had authored a 1925 memo to the Owerri Province resident entitled “Women’s Purity Campaign.” 2 In his memo, Cochrane, at the time district officer of Bende, reported a recent encounter with groups of dancers, numbering “several hundred women,” in the large market town of Umuahia, the site of even larger demonstrations in 1929. These women had caused a series of disturbances in the Umuahia area, beginning with the denuding of young women in the marketplace and proceeding to seize property belonging to Christian women and certain, unspecified men. Cochrane presided over several court cases resulting from the property seizures and fined the assembled women accordingly. Although he did not think the women took their fines “seriously,” he wrote to his superior that the “Women’s Purity Campaign” presented no real threat to the government and should be treated as a civil matter rather than as a wholesale breach of the peace. Seemingly, in the four years that separated the “Women’s Purity Campaign” from the Women’s War, D. O. Cochrane had forgotten the former event and, even after the Ogu, failed to recognize its significance or connection to the latter. For Cochrane, with his fifteen years’ experience in “Ibo country,” as for other colonial administrators, it was as if the “riots” of late 1929 burst out of nowhere and no-time, being without precedent.

This historical amnesia regarding southeastern Nigerian women’s organizational abilities was not limited to British officials. Former Warrant Chief Okugo of Oloko, discussed at greater length in Chapter 5, repeatedly suggested to the Aba Commission that women were incapable of organizing themselves in such numbers, despite clear evidence to the contrary. He tried in particular to cast doubt on the account of his antagonist, the Oloko women’s leader Nwanyeruwa, by saying that she sounded the alarm on women’s possible taxation and led women to his compound at the instigation of her husband Ojim. 3 Okugo did not mention the groups of dancing women who made unscheduled and uninvited visits to warrant chiefs between October and December of 1925, even though these Nwaobiala dancers appear from colonial records to have been ubiquitous in the Bende and Okigwe districts. Instead, he claimed to have been as shocked and astonished by the women’s activities as the local British officials. This feigned astonishment rang hollow when Nwugo Enyidie, another of the women leaders of Oloko, testified to the Aba Commission that Okugo was known for assaulting women who protested against him en masse:
Chairman: What was [the case against Okugo in 1929]?

Nwugo: He was sentenced to imprisonment for two years for assaulting women. Some of the women were wounded with spears. One woman was injured and as a result miscarried. That was the second occasion on which he assaulted women.

Chairman: What was the first occasion?

Nwugo: The first occasion was about four years ago. Women were massed around and he assaulted them, and on this occasion, when taxation was mentioned, he also assaulted women.4

Although Nwugo Enyidie gave no name for the earlier moment when women “were massed around,” she provided a specific time reference. Chief Okugo’s last assault on women took place around the same time as the Nwaobiala (literally) swept through the southeast. Although never admitted by those colonial officials who produced accounts of the first women’s movement in a series of memos and intelligence reports, the historical connection between Nwaobiala and the Ogu Umunwaanyi seems to have been well-understood by the women who initiated both events. This both offers a glimpse of contemporary southeastern Nigerian women’s historical consciousness and highlights the willful mis- or under-representation of particular colonial subjects within the colonial archive, demonstrating how the naturalized power dynamics of British rule made some silences deeper than others, even to the detriment of the efficient use of the tools of administration.

The official silencing of the Nwaobiala in the testimony before the Aba Commission also shaped the subsequent historiography of the Ogu. The colonial anthropologist C. K. Meek, who enjoyed full access to colonial records for the Nigerian southeast, noted the existence of a “feminist disturbance” that predated 1929, but only glossed the movement, even neglecting to record any of the several colonial names for it, much less what participants in the movement called themselves.5 Meek also failed to note any connection between the two movements, besides their “feminist” character, by which he seems to have meant only that the participants were mainly women in both. Similarly, Margery Perham, Sylvia Leith-Ross, and Margaret M. Green—the first, as we have seen, a political apologist for indirect rule and the last two, researchers sent by the British government to investigate Igbo women’s activities after 1929—made much of the Ogu in their writings but had nothing to say about the Nwaobiala that preceded it. As Perham and Leith-Ross had the closest personal (as well as professional) ties to colonial administrators, their research openly reflected their approval of and participation in colonial structures of domination. It should therefore come as no surprise that they neglected what administrators obviously considered a minor incident, or had forgotten completely in the intervening years. Green, however, wrote a nuanced and detailed ethnography of women’s life in an Igbo village-group. She took great care to study women’s egwu (song/dance) performances and showed how local women maintained an active remembrance of significant events in their storytelling.6 Thus, it seems odd that Green and her female informants did not discuss the Nwaobiala, unless the events of 1925 seemed insignificant in the eyes of local Agbaja women or, more likely, they hesitated to mention it to her. Indeed, for reasons of their own, Green’s informants were extremely reluctant to speak to her about 1929, and many women had to be coaxed or coerced into testifying before the Aba Commission, while those who did often refused to name their compatriots.7 The women in 1929, it seems, may have sworn binding oaths to “stand by” each other in the face of any male or colonial authorities. And, as Green noted, “this swearing of mutual support in a common enterprise probably throws light on the refusal” of women in 1930 to answer questions about their participation in the Women’s War.8 It may also throw light on why the Nwaobiala dancers—and Agbaja women’s reactions to it—were omitted or glossed over in their discussions with Green.

Since most of what we can know about the Nwaobiala comes from colonial documents, our analysis faces a number of difficulties and must remain speculative to some extent. Nevertheless, the remainder of this chapter reopens the question of what happened during late 1925 in the Bende and Okigwe districts and what the Nwaobiala might tell us about the events of 1929. The dancing women’s movement provides
A miraculous or monstrous birth

British officials agreed that the *Nwaobiala* began with a “miraculous birth” during the latter part of 1925 somewhere near Atta, a town in Okigwe district, but their reports otherwise eschewed specifics. Busy colonial men did not consider miraculous births either a part of their usual province or worthy of closer investigation, even when they incited “bands of women dancers preaching ideas of desirable reforms.”9 Because the colonial administration did not inquire into the nature of this miraculous birth, this is the limit of our information about how the movement started. Yet the women dancers’ names for it, of which there were at least two, offer a clue.

Although colonial officials gave the events of 1925 several names at the time—Dancing Women’s Movement, Women’s Purity Campaign, Market Riots, and even Anti-Government Propaganda in Abakaliki—they recorded only two names that the women dancers gave themselves and their *egwu*: *Nwaobiala* or *Obanjili*. *Nwaobiala* could mean several things. However, since British colonials ignored the term in Igbo orthography at the time, it is impossible to say with certainty what it meant to the dancers in 1925. Afigbo noted that there was a “birth of [a] monstrosity” in Okigwe “sometime between the last week of October and the first week of November 1925.”10 A native speaker of Igbo, Afigbo divided the term into three words—*nwa obi ala*. This phrase can be translated into English as “child from the heart/center of Ala (the land),” or “child from the compound of Ala,” depending on the tone of *obi*. In either sense, the “child” (*nwa*) is characterized as belonging to the land, not to any particular person living on it.

To the present day, Igbo speakers represent Ala/Ani, the earth deity, as female, and she remains one of the two most important Igbo deities.11 Although spoken of in general terms as the land, an all-encompassing cosmological being as well as cosmographical projection of the everyday landscape, every village group or town in the Igbo-speaking southeast has a particular shrine to the *ala/ani* on which it stands.12 These shrines serve as focal points for the local veneration of the land. Southern Igbo speakers allude to the deity’s more generalized aspect in certain types of ritual speech (e.g., interjections like “Ala/Ani forbid the abomination!”), and once commemorated her interventions in human affairs in the extraordinary artistic constructions known as *mbari* houses.13

Associated with the deity’s feminine qualities, Igbo-speaking women owed purificatory duties to this more generalized aspect of Ala. In some areas they were responsible for the ritual opening and cleaning of pathways between villages or between villages and “bush” shrines to the deity, making these passageways inscribed on the body of the land *ocha* (white/transparent). In other areas, women moved across the landscape with torches lit from their cooking fires, symbolically burning away impurities or pollution (*alu*) that accumulated in the land over the course of a year.14 Alternately, women called upon Ala/Ani during their most intimate travail, childbirth, an event that involved Ala directly.15 The deity’s role in childbirth and female-dominated purificatory activities may help to explain why she was implicated in the miracle/monstrosity whose birth began the 1925 *egwu*.

Although extreme beauty of form could express the pleasure of the earth, many such cases evoked the displeasure of Ala/Ani manifested on the bodies of offending human beings. In the late 1980s, many still said that children born with teeth or with too many (or too few) digits, for example, indicated the land’s anger, and at one time such children would have been liable to exposure in the “bad bush” outside the village. In calling the miraculous birth of 1925 a monster, then, Afigbo interpreted the movement’s name to mean that a child was born deformed or otherwise marked in some material fashion as a portent sent...
from the Earth to alert people of her unhappiness. This reading accords well with some of the actions taken by the groups of dancing women who visited towns throughout Okigwe and Bende divisions in late 1925. Afigbo speculated that people who witnessed the monstrous birth felt compelled to consult local *ndi dibia* (healer/diviners) or oracles as to the meaning of the sign and that these mysterious agents “must have seized the opportunity to attribute the birth of the monstrosity to the intrusion of new ways of thought and deed, and in conclusion urged a return to ancestral ways.”

This initially appears to be a sensible proposition, in keeping with local practices and demonstrating a respect for internal social and historical processes. Unfortunately, on the basis of almost no archival or oral historical evidence, it disassociates women from any conscious, active role in initiating the movement, implying that women could not draw conclusions about birth abnormalities, Ala, and the contemporary imposition of the colonial order on their own and in terms of their collective interests.

Afigbo also failed to take into account Igbo-speaking women’s long-established practice of making *egwu*, an important part of female public discourse. *Egwu* performances represented a key aspect of Igbo women’s lives, often used to shame male authorities and give voice to women’s communal grievances and demands. Men generally did not take part in the elaboration of women’s *egwu*, just as women did not interfere with those of men. Women often formulated, practiced, and polished these songs/dances during women-only meetings and unveiled them to men and women of other villages at public events like markets or town festivals. New *egwu* circulated by means of these public performances, where non-participant women watched and learned the latest movements, words, and tunes, then taught the *egwu* to others in their marital towns. Thus, even if (male) diviners or other ritual practitioners initially told women that the miraculous birth was connected, by way of divine displeasure, to the intrusion of “new ways of thought and deed,” it is highly unlikely that these men dictated the content of the women’s *egwu* or prescribed its targets.

As we will see below, the lists of demands propounded during the *Nwaobiala* often ran counter to the interests of male authority, a fact recognized by at least some colonial administrators and “native authorities” after the movement began to die away. Other officials ignored or simply did not know enough about women’s usual dance practice and suggested that the dance must be the product of outside, male provocateurs. R. A. Roberts, for example, the senior resident at Onitsha, wrote to his counterpart in Owerri on December 8, 1925 to inquire about the origins of the dance: “Is it some individual who wants to make money? Is it some so-called religious body or is it of Aro origin?”

This assumption regarding southeastern Nigerian women’s supposed lack of political initiative became so pervasive—and persuasive—in Nigerian historiography that even Afigbo, who wrote sensitively about British-Aro relations in other contexts, continued to subscribe to it over forty years later.

**Singing, dancing, and sweeping**

In search of signs of “anti-government propaganda” at a tenuous moment in the elaboration of British administration in southeastern Nigeria, colonial officials collected lists of demands from the dancers and noted the general tenor of the movement as it passed through the southern Okigwe and Bende divisions into towns as far north as Abakaliki, Nnobi, and Enugu. Colonial officials first noticed what they called bands of dancing women in November, although they later determined that the movement was already well underway in Okigwe during October. These bands would appear suddenly in a town not their own, usually in or around the marketplace, and announce their presence by a prolonged and ritualized sweeping of the public spaces. While sweeping the pathways, market, and the *ilo* (open areas) in the town, the women evidently gathered information from their curious onlookers as to the residences of important male
elders, warrant chiefs, and other men affiliated with the colonial government. The purificatory symbolism of the unknown women’s actions would have been obvious to the women of the chosen town. Sweeping was (and remains) a quintessential female task among Igbo-speaking peoples—often the first chore assigned to a young girl. During the 1920s, it constituted an integral part of Igbo women’s daily routine within the confines of their marital compounds as well as part of their annual rituals of land purification.\textsuperscript{18} In this context, however, the act of sweeping was rather different from its western counterpart. Igbo-speaking people historically used a hand broom that required them to bend at the waist towards the earth and come into closer contact with the ground than required by long-handled brooms. This motion of sweeping in close proximity to the ground therefore linked the \textit{Nwaobiala} dancers with the deity that their song/dance’s name evoked through a physical gesture.

In each instance, the dancers, who were all women, first arrived in the most central women’s public space—the \textit{afia} (market)—and worked their way, sweeping, through the other public spaces of the town. The market, as we have seen in \textit{Chapter 1}, was a central gathering spot that was used for age grade, rotating credit association, and other meetings as well as buying and selling. The market also served as a primary locus for the announcement of news and grievances, and, in general, a space where everyone (including spiritual beings) met to exchange greetings, goods, and ideas. Women who entered \textit{n’afia} (into the market) were under the protection of the ritualized market peace (\textit{udo afia}), and breaking the market peace amounted to an act of \textit{nso ani} (an abomination against the earth). In part because the town’s major shrine to Ala/Ani was often within or on the edge of the marketplace, many viewed the deity as the special guardian of that space. Thus, the \textit{Nwaobiala} dancers began their \textit{egwu} with a complex symbolic statement. In the single gesture of sweeping the marketplace, they associated themselves with the market peace, the earth deity, women’s “useful” trading activities, and their purificatory responsibilities. Each of these represented aspects of female authority within Igbo-speaking towns. By bringing them together in the first movement of their \textit{egwu}, the women suggested to their audience that they were acting on the basis of that authority.

The dancing and sweeping women then moved out from the market through the \textit{ama} (pathways) that fed into the market from all parts of the town, signaling a greater engagement with the town as a whole by assuming purificatory duties usually reserved for townspeople. The act of strangers moving to cleanse the public spaces of a town was a graphic representation of how widespread and problematic pollution had become. The “bands” of dancers, brandishing brooms, emerging from the marketplace and thereby invoking its divine protection, must have appeared quite formidable, and at least some townswomen joined the dancers by the time they were ready for the next stage of the \textit{egwu}, the visit to chiefly or other male elders’ residences. Indeed, after some district officers forbade the dance, the women “ignorned [sic]” the orders. Some local male residents excused their failure to suppress the \textit{egwu} to the administration “by saying they were afraid.”\textsuperscript{19}

After learning where the warrant chiefs and other town elders lived, the \textit{Nwaobiala} “band” would enter those compounds and begin a much less generalized song/dance, one directed towards the ruling authority. Since it involved local men whom they had selected for office under the Lugardian system of indirect rule, the second movement of the \textit{egwu} attracted the attention of colonial officials. Acting district officer of Awgu, A. Niven, described one such scene: “[they] proceeded to sweep and clean [the chief’s] compound, as compound cleanliness is not customary in this division this not only caused an impression but also gave the neighborhood time to assemble, then the dance began.”\textsuperscript{20} Clearly prejudicial, Niven’s editorial comment about compound cleanliness among the Igbo illustrated colonial officials’ ignorance and willful disregard for southeastern Nigerian women’s daily activities, helping us to understand how women’s organizational abilities later appeared so inexplicable to Niven and his colleagues.

During this period, groups of Igbo-speaking townswomen commonly swept the town’s public spaces as
a general purificatory gesture, but not the private space of the compound, which was associated with male
lineage ownership and husbanding. Only women belonging to a particular compound by birth or
marriage would sweep it, even during the annual purification rituals. It was extraordinary for women who
were unattached to the patrilineage or the village group to enter these private, highly masculine spaces
and clean them, much less engage in an uninvited egwu there. Women from outside might come to any
town’s market, but they would not presume to enter its compounds without permission, even if they had a
case against the compound owners.

The ritual actions of the Nwaobiala dancers progressed from the initial egwu in the marketplace (a
place where the presence of stranger women was sanctioned) to the sweeping and other cleaning of
public spaces to the more transgressive sweeping of lineage spaces. This demonstrated that the contagion
was not limited to the centers of most public interaction but infected even the most intimate places where
powerful men held sway. By sweeping a warrant chief’s compound, the dancers asserted their control
over the space and those inhabiting it. This represented only a temporary mastery, however, just as the
broom offered only interim success in the war against dirt. As Mary Douglas reminded us, “Dirt...is
never a unique, isolated event. Where there is dirt there is system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic
ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements.”

The women briefly took over the space (ordering it), advised men, and made demands of them (rejecting
“inappropriate elements”) for a moment before disappearing again, always on a note that assured men of
the potential of a higher sanction (invoking the system). Sweeping was therefore a prelude for the
identification of the sources of pollution. The actual songs that the women sang and to which they danced
spoke more directly to these.

Colonial officials collected information about the content of these songs. Acting District Officer Niven
provided the senior resident in Onitsha with what appears to be the most extensive list of the women’s
complaints and demands:

1. That they were sent by Chineke (God) to deliver this message and that it would help women to bear children.
2. That no dirt was to be allowed in houses and compounds and more sanitary cleanliness to be observed.
3. That no nuisance should be committed in compound or under breadfruit trees or palm tree lest the falling fruit be contaminated.
4. That all the old roads were to be cleaned and reopened.
5. That old customs should be observed and not allowed to lapse.
6. That no girls or young married women should wear cloth until they were with first child, but go naked as in old days. At Achi the
‘dancers’ had actually torn the cloths off some girls they met.
7. That men should not plant cassava but leave this as women’s prerequisite and that cassava should not be mixed with yams in the
farms and that Aro coco yams (the big pointed leaved colocasia) should not be planted at all.
8. That women with child should not eat coco yams[,] cassava or stock fish as these resulted in birth of twins.
9. That poor men were often punished in native courts at instance of rich men, all cases in which poor men were concerned as
defendants should be tried at chief’s [sic] houses and only taken to native court if unsatisfactory. (It was obvious that people were not
clear as to what this meant.)
10. Free born to marry free born and slave slave [:; Christian to marry christian, pagan pagan.
11. In paying dowries for wives the amount should not be too much but brass rods or other native currency should be used for the first
payment in preference to cash money.
12. More honesty should be shown in dowry disputes when stating amounts paid or claimed (very desirable).
13. Women should not charge too much for their services as prostitutes (from Lokpanta via Ngoda and Amuda in Okigwe district) and
married women should be allowed to have intercourse with other men without being liable to be taken from the Native Courts.
14. That the message should be passed on at once to four other chiefs always in a Northerly direction.
15. That all chiefs visited must expect to be called to Okigwe soon to interview ‘Chineke’ (God) personally.
16. The chiefs visited to dash the women dancers a goat or 10/-.
17. Fowls and cassava eggs and other native produce to be sold in markets at fixed price (The price fixed varied from 3d. [for] fowls at
Achi to 1/6 in other places, usually being lower than current market prices).

The acting district officer of Onitsha, Milne, supplemented Niven’s list with the following:
From these complex lists, British officials distilled a limited number of conclusions, which became the basis for their myopic view of the dancers’ intentions. To them the Nwaobiala appeared to be chiefly about sanitation, the evils of prostitution, and an expression of native, specifically female, conservatism. They surmised that local men “in general were not at all in sympathy with it” and, thus, averred that it was not political or seditious in nature. The latter became the majority view, although several officials suggested that it was conspiratorial or likely the work of outside instigators. Colonial officials like Niven, who took a less serious view of the proceedings, viewed the act of sweeping as purely instrumental and characterized the Nwaobiala as a movement concerned with sanitation and purity or, more precisely, chastity. K. A. B. Cochrane interpreted the Nwaobiala as a call to arms over the need to control sex work in the southeast. “It is realized,” he wrote, “that the diseases caused by prostitution are decreasing fecundity,” alluding to the fears about venereal diseases that preoccupied British authorities. The indulgent view that women were incapable of seditious behavior on their own triumphed owing to its appeal to an image of local women’s lives as mundane, irrational, ahistorical, and apolitical. As the district officer of Owelli, MacGregor, explained, “I would add that the song was sung only by women—the most conservative part of the community, and the most influential who alone invariably sing at their dances and who once getting hold of an idea, in their feminine way cling to it tenaciously, without understanding, regardless of reason and sense.”

This analysis largely exonerated African men from blame in the affair and kept the administration from feeling compelled to use (costly) force at a time when officials were developing policies for the peaceful exploitation of this recently “unpacified” part of the Nigerian colony. There was, however, an undertone of censure in these memos, implying that local men should not allow women to behave in such an outrageous fashion, which undoubtedly was passed along through interpreters, court messengers, and warrant chiefs to the men in villages throughout the southeast. In the end, the demands of the Nwaobiala dancers, often inexplicable to colonial administrators, were catalogued, filed away, and then promptly forgotten. Nevertheless, these lists provide some insight into the provenance of the movement and the women’s underlying concerns.

Falling fruit, unclothed girls, and death on the roadways

When the Nwaobiala began in 1925, the women attempted to present their case to both the warrant chiefs and other elders of recognized local authority. The miraculous birth, a message for men but received from Chineke by women, served as a rallying point and an opportunity for women to convey their grievances to the men in an organized fashion. These grievances reflected the changes taking place throughout southeastern Nigeria, most of which negatively affected women’s status in the community.

As recorded by colonial officials, the demands of the Nwaobiala dancers touched upon three related issues that are significant for considering the relation between the events of 1925 and the Women’s War of 1929: contamination and its relation to fertility; improper relations between women; and the material
effects of British colonialism on the lives of Igbo-speaking women. One of the primary demands was for better cleanliness in compounds and markets, and, as noted above, the only physical motion universally associated with the *egwu* of 1925 was bending low to the ground and sweeping. British officials took these admonitions to mean that women felt southeastern towns were dirty, and at least one district officer agreed heartily with that assessment. But were the women’s concerns focused on the literal dirt that they swept from the markets, compounds, and other spaces with their brooms? Acting District Officer Niven noted that the *Nwaobiala* dancers announced that Chineke had sent them to deliver the *egwu* message and “that it would help women to bear children.” The dancers did not invoke the name of Ala/Ani in their demands, even if it was implied in their name for themselves and their performance. Igbo-speaking people commonly viewed Chineke as a creative spiritual force, which usually had positive interactions with human beings, and invoked Chineke to ward off the *nso ani* (abominations against the earth) that otherwise might elicit sanctions from the powerful earth deity. Thus, women in the 1920s who wished to cleanse the land and avoid Ala/Ani’s anger might have invoked the aid of Chineke.

Igbo-speaking peoples commonly saw a connection between contamination and childbearing during this period and viewed the birth of monsters or unearthly beauties as part of the communication system between the earth and those human beings living on it. Many also believed that difficulties in childbirth were afflictions sent from Ala/Ani to signal her displeasure with human delicts like adultery, having sex in inappropriate places (notably outside the village or lying directly on the ground) or at inappropriate times (during the pregnancy or while nursing), and a general lack of adherence to proper human behavior. Women involved in lengthy, increasingly dangerous travails were encouraged to confess their wrongful actions in order to ease their pains and give birth to a living child. According to most Igbo groups, bearing a dead child polluted the mother, witnesses to the birth, and even the place where the stillbirth occurred. Women of the 1920s tried to give birth within their marital compounds, squatting outside the buildings in the *ilo* (courtyard) under the surveillance of senior women. The midwife or other female attendants would be careful to catch the child before it could touch the earth, since that also constituted an affront to Ala/Ani. If both child and mother died in childbirth, their bodies would be deposited, usually without burial, in the “bad bush” like those of any person dying an abominable death. The earth, which gave the person his/her form, refused to take that form back if it was sullied by misuse. Having one’s body cast aside unceremoniously at death was tantamount to losing one’s divinely created form as well as one’s human, social identity—and therefore to losing one’s opportunity for future incarnations in the human community. This led to an unresolved, anomalous spiritual condition that people found dangerous and obviously wished to avoid.

Since women’s bodies and their children bore the initial brunt of Ala/Ani’s anger, it behooved women as a group to take action and to alert men to a communication from the earth deity, especially a communication visited on and through women like a “miraculous birth.” Such events moved women to pay closer attention to their localized purificatory responsibilities, such as keeping compounds, marketplaces, shrines, and pathways clean as well as unblocking or drawing attention to the potentially dangerous areas of contamination. However, vigilance against pollution was not exclusively women’s responsibility. For example, the third point on Niven’s list stated that no one, male or female, should permit a “nuisance” to be committed within compounds “or under breadfruit trees or palm tree lest the falling fruit be contaminated.” Colonial officials like Niven and Cochrane presumed that such admonishments concerned sanitation and may even have seen them as evidence that over a decade of colonial and mission sanitary campaigns were beginning to yield results. Yet in light of southeastern Nigerian women’s rhetoric during the 1930 Aba Commission’s hearings following the Women’s War, this seems to be an inadequate reading. The British often used the term “nuisance” to refer to excrement or other particularly offending refuse in public
spaces, and Igbo-speaking women often expressed themselves scatologically in their egwu. A more accurate rendering of this demand might be that people should not shit beneath breadfruit or palm trees, the trees that Igbo-speaking people referred to rhetorically as “useful trees” or the “trees that bear fruit.” In 1929, women sang a very similar song to warrant chiefs and colonial officials, making a direct connection between themselves and “trees which bear fruit.” As Enyidia of Mbiopongo told the Aba Commission, “We said, ‘What have we, women, done to warrant our being taxed? We women are like trees which bear fruit. You should tell us the reason why women who bear seeds should be counted.’” Southeastern Igbo women considered breadfruit trees to be their personal property and the palm tree to be dedicated to Ala/Ani herself. This demand, then, was a metaphorical statement, asking the intended audience not to shit on (make conditions intolerable for) women or the earth, lest children who belonged to their father’s patrilineages be besmirched. In 1925, the Nwaobiala dancers enacted gendered problems related to purification, fertility, and power under the new colonial regime through reference to the actions of their bodies. In demanding that public and private places be kept clean and sweeping markets and the compounds of prominent men, the women underscored their important role in the purification of the land.

The Nwaobiala dancers’ insistence that bridewealth be reduced to pre-colonial levels and paid in local currencies reflected women’s social and economic grievances under the new colonial administration. Inflated bridewealth payments made it more difficult for many women to marry, impinging upon their usefulness, which was tied directly to marriage and fertility. The use of foreign currency for bridewealth exacerbated inflationary tendencies because access to British currency, as we have seen above, remained limited for agriculturalists in the interior. Moreover, as bridewealth became monetized, it had even become difficult for women to divorce or assist their daughters to do so, tying women even more securely to the family and village of their husbands. Bridewealth paid in pounds and shillings was hard to collect and even harder to refund, since most British currency immediately circulated back into coffers of mercantile interests, the missions, or, after the introduction of male taxation in 1925, the colonial government. Later marriage, or marriage with older men, was another consequence of a newly monetized system of bridewealth, and the fertility of women in general could suffer from such arrangements.

The women’s desire for bridewealth disputes to be handled with greater transparency and honesty pointed to the women’s distrust of and increased vulnerability under the new court system. The women called for a boycott of the native courts, “as poor men were often punished in native courts at instance of rich men.” This issue only became more pronounced in the years between the Nwaobiala and the Ogu of 1929. Akulechula, a woman from Obowo, made it clear to the Aba Commission that she believed the courts were corrupt and caused the price of all cases to soar: “It has been alleged by a Chief that he owned twelve bags of money. I ask whether each of you, Europeans, in this hall owns twelve bags of money? If not, how can a single chief own twelve bags of money?…We wish the Chiefs not to sit in the Court any longer. Let them retire and enjoy the money they have made already.”

Other demands of the Nwaobiala dancers reflected changes directly affecting women’s lives and, by extension, the social good. These included prohibiting food (each type of food in the list had been introduced to the region with increased European contact) thought to lead to the birth of twins, young girls from wearing clothing, wives being given to Christians, and prostitution or, at least, prostitutes charging overly high fees. Many continued to view twin births as abominations against the land. Encouraging women to bear twins or to keep twins that were born, as many missionaries did, was analogous to encouraging abomination and tempting the disastrous wrath of Ala. Similarly, women who were given as wives to Christians were compared to free women given as wives to osu, or sacred slaves, a practice that
was also close to abomination.\textsuperscript{41}

For the Nwaobiala dancers, the bodies of women were both a major source of concern and the medium for their resistance to pollution. In early November K. A. B. Cochrane was dispatched to Umuahia to investigate rumors that young, unmarried girls were being stripped in the marketplace. Upon arrival he encountered “several hundred women” who were behaving in an orderly fashion. Umuahia residents agreed that girls had been stripped; Cochrane concluded that “the clothes had been taken away by their mothers who knew that the clothes were the price of their daughters’ profligacy,” and that consequently the Nwaobiala was about “purity” (read chastity).\textsuperscript{42} For him, women stripping other women constituted a minor breach of the peace, and it seemed profligacy had received its just reward. Accusations that the Nwaobiala dancers had seized missionized women’s property disturbed him much more.

From the perspective of Igbo-speaking women, stripping unmarried girls had deeper significance. Girls certainly appeared naked in the marketplace before 1925, so it was not their undress in and of itself that shocked onlookers. Rather, it was the act of denuding these youthful, female bodies that was the focus of the protest.\textsuperscript{43} Both Niven’s and Milne’s reports on the women’s egwu included justifications for this action. The women told Niven that girls should not wear cloth “until they were with first child, but go naked as in old days.” Milne’s African informant wrote, “women must be naked so that privates must be kept warm by the sun.” J. C. Iwenofu, a literate Igbo member of Achi native court who corresponded with his district officer about the movement, elaborated further: “All girls to be naked as in the olden times and not to trade. [A]ny girl who offend[s] this law to be taken to the god at Okigwe.”\textsuperscript{44}

The Nwaobiala dancers’ displeasure with missionized women’s dress should be read within the context of notions of proper attire for youthful women in the immediate pre-colonial and early colonial periods. Rural Igbo girls generally went unclothed, and even adult women tended, on an everyday basis, to mark their status as wives and mothers by wrapping only a small piece of cloth around their loins. Girls close to marriage age adorned themselves with impressive, helmet-like constructions of hair, sometimes wigs, stretched over frames and held in place with palm oil as well as red or mica-flaked mud. They also painted uli (a natural pigment made from several local plants) designs on their bodies, practiced scarification on their bellies, breasts, backs, and upper thighs, and rubbed camwood or chalk into their skin to enhance its appearance. Once past puberty, young women might tie a string, hang brass ornaments, or wear a rope of beads above their genitals, and northern Igbo girls frequently put on the heavy brass anklets (ogba), which encircled their lower legs from foot to knee. Igbo girls were considered to be in a proper moral as well as bodily state when fully adorned and painted. Their breasts and stomachs were visible, so senior women who were the guardians of girls’ sexual status could observe and act upon any physical signs of pregnancy before marriage.\textsuperscript{45}

Before the 1920s, serious traders were rarely in their teens or early twenties. Afia (market/trade) was the business of women who were mature, those who, although married several years, had no children or had borne several children now old enough to take on responsibilities around their natal compound. Young girls had responsibilities at home or performed various activities meant to beautify and strengthen their fertile bodies in preparation for marriage and the bearing of children for their husbands’ patrilines.\textsuperscript{46}

Within their natal compounds, girls came under the supervision of senior women as well as older men. Compounds enclosed and protected young unmarried women’s productive and reproductive potential for their future husbands. By contrast, the open and freewheeling atmosphere of the marketplace was a space characterized by a variety of temptations. Presumably, mature women could better resist these temptations or, at least, be properly discreet. What is more, their indiscretions were less damaging, since they already had children, personal renown, and clear social standing.

Cloth remained a social marker of status for men and women in the 1920s, the very symbol of the wealth associated with a proper maturity, but it was becoming more widely available as a result of colonial
Increasingly, young women who entered the cash economy, whether through the auspices of small trade, domestic labor for the missions, or the sale of sexual services, were able not only to purchase cloth but to have it fashioned into the blouses and frocks introduced by Christian missionaries.

The missions devoted a great deal of attention to clothing women’s bodies in “modest dress,” and many female missionaries specialized in teaching sewing and laundry practices to women who showed an interest in conversion. Senior women, however, were less likely to become involved in mission culture. Young women’s desire for cloth and “modern” fashions after missionization represented a significant challenge to the generational status quo among women. The cloth that missionaries and some colonial officials considered appropriate for covering young women’s bodies and helping them to develop a proper Christian sense of shame also provided them with “cover” against the prying eyes and fingers of their female elders. As “frocks” appeared with growing frequency on the backs of young, town-dwelling girls, it eroded the value of the cloth-wealth that older women had accumulated over the course of their lifetimes and limited the ability of the latter to police the actions of junior women. Thus, Igbo women, particularly elders, perceived the new attire of the average schoolgirl or missionized woman as a form of resistance to proper relations between the indigenous generations and potentially an expression of immoral sexual behavior. Throughout the late 1920s, elder women continued to perceive improper dress—in this instance, being clothed—as both a symptom and the cause of young women’s engagement with sex work in the growing cities, to the point that some respectable Igbo matrons informed Sylvia Leith-Ross that they “used the word ‘civilized’ as synonymous for ‘immoral’...[because] when a girl was civilized, that is to say, educated, she very nearly automatically became immoral.”

The development of a cash economy devalued older forms of accumulation, and women who invested in those forms saw their own value declining as a result. At the same time, the trading skills of senior women provided a vital source of cash for households, which suddenly needed currency with the imposition of a tax of men in 1925. Young women purchasing clothing and cloth with currency became complicit in these changes, in effect encouraging the development of an economy that did not take into account the collective interests of women. From the point of view of the denuded girls, being stripped naked of the foreign clothing styles that adorned them equated to having their involvement in the new economic opportunities of the colonial economy and power to consume stripped away. Senior women who tore away those foreign clothes enacted a public remonstration against their daughters’ entanglements with money, but it was not necessarily on the basis that Cochrane postulated.

Burgeoning sex work was doubtless a concern in many towns, but it appears from Niven’s list that the women viewed prostitution as more an economic than a moral problem. Prostitution as such was probably not known prior to the advent of the British, and it had great potential for upending inter-generational relations among women and spoiling the land in general. Women’s sexuality in the “traditional” Igbo context was kept within bounds, particularly within the bounds of the male-controlled compound. Adultery was not unknown, but it came with consequences in the form of fines if discovered. In prostitution, women took charge of their own sexuality and traded it for money or goods. The Nwaobiala
dancers’ disapproval likely stemmed from a conviction that women’s sexuality should be controlled through marriage and thereby rendered “useful” to the group as a whole, not merely to individual women themselves. The women told Niven that “women should not charge too much for their service as prostitutes,” and, at the same time, that married (i.e. more senior) women should be allowed to have affairs without “being liable to be taken before the native courts.” That is, young women without marital ties should not be allowed to capitalize too much on their sexuality, while older women should not be liable for fines in British currency for the expression of their own. After all, the “trees that bear fruit” (useful women, in the speech of participants in the Ogu) produced offspring for their husbands’ patrilineages, whoever their children’s biological fathers might be. Youthful prostitutes, by contrast, fed money back into the alien colonial system. Wrapped in purchased cloth and sold like that cloth to any stranger, their “privates”/bodies did not see the sun, attenuating their fertility in much the same way that too little sunlight ruined crops. Yet a degree of ambiguity suffused the Nwaobiala dancers’ strictures regarding prostitution. If not abolished altogether, they insisted that the prices charged by prostitutes should be kept low so as not to consume so much of men’s finances, which were linked inextricably to those of women. The women seemed to have found it difficult to condemn the entrepreneurial tendencies of prostitutes completely, but those women not engaged in the new trade did not want all of men’s resources to go into it, or for it to subvert the honorable work of women within marriage.

The threat of infertility stood at the heart of the Nwaobiala egwu. The issue of fertility was not limited to women’s bodies but extended to the very health of the land. Women’s concerns about gender segregation in farming and the proper crops for men and women to grow were linked to the problem of fertility or ndu (a term that can also be glossed as “life”) in general. As we saw in Chapter 1, the expansion of British influence in southeastern Nigeria resulted in a dramatic transformation of agricultural production, the effects of which were exacerbated by the gendered nature of paid employment under colonial rule. Prior to colonial and mission incursion, men and women throughout the southeast grew separate but complementary crops, with women locating their own gardens and intercropping around the prototypical “male” crop, yams. Some of the Nwaobiala dancers’ demands spoke directly to changes in agricultural and especially food staples production. The dancing women warned men to stay away from (female-centered) trade and to concentrate, in a gender appropriate fashion, on yam cultivation.

Obanjili, the other name recorded by colonial officials for the women’s movement, invoked yam (ji) cultivation and a return to a yam-based cuisine (jili, yam-eating). According to the senior resident in Onitsha, on November 4, women in Nara, Afikpo division, held “a special dance in honour of yams[,] declaring that yams would drive out cassava.” Senior men in more northerly villages contacted the administration to complain that “they did not want the dance to visit them and that they were quite capable of growing yams without advice from AFIKPO.” By the mid-1920s, rather than building yam hills and yam barns, a growing number of men were cultivating other crops, entering trade, working for the Christian missions, and constructing roads and rail beds for the developing colonial system of transportation.

The Nwaobiala dancers pointedly protested the implementation of fixed prices in the markets, men’s entry into trading, and the construction of new roads. Their demands regarding control of the market place emphasized its centrality to women’s proper status in Igbo society. As part of the colonial administration’s attempt to “stabilize” the economy of southeastern Nigeria and standardize the workings of the markets, officials began playing a direct role in establishing prices, which then would be fixed at that level. Previously, women, particularly the elder members, dominated the market through their association and enforced prohibitions in the marketplace. For the market to remain a place where women and goods circulated freely, buyers and sellers needed the freedom to haggle. If prices were set at predetermined levels, women could not demonstrate their skill at trading, an important aspect of the
female performance of “usefulness.”

The entry of men into local trading represented a reversal of proper gender roles, which women in 1925 compared to women going into male-oriented agriculture. As Mba noted, “Women resented [men’s] intrusion into an activity which had always been reserved for women, while other men taunted them for doing women’s work. However, after the pioneers had demonstrated that trading could be a lucrative occupation for men, more and more of them entered the market.” Male traders often resisted the authority of the female association elders and could not participate fully in the activities of women traders directed towards the enforcement of market rules. Moreover, Mba suggested, these male traders were, by and large, Christianized men. Considering women’s ritual duties to the market deity, such men could have been seen as dangerous to the general health of the market and, therefore, to all those who participated in it because of women’s doubly marked status. According to Green, women in Umueke who were Christians or nominally Christianized continued to perform their ritual activities in the market. With no previous experience of the obligations to the market deity and little conception of their importance, Christian men could not be expected to uphold those obligations.

As discussed in Chapter 1, the female-centered marketplace existed in opposition to and complemented the male-centered compound. Men’s entry into the local markets brought them into conflict with women and women’s ritual activities, while also sparking economic competition between the sexes and undermining the existing system of fiscal interdependence. It is unclear to what extent yam production declined as a result of the new trading opportunities open to men, but women, especially older or more “traditional” members of the community, likely considered any drop-off an ominous portent. Women’s profits from the market surely suffered from the new competition, particularly in larger or what Mba called “middleman” markets where Europeans and their trade gravitated towards the men. The intrusion of men into the local markets, then, threatened women’s economic interests and ultimately the well-being of the land.

Colonial building projects had become a major source of resentment by the 1920s. Before the construction of government roads, the colonial administration instituted the system of transportation involving “carriers” or “bearers.” Local administrators required warrant chiefs to provide large numbers of (male) laborers whenever needed. Men who previously traveled very little outside their home areas and then only after taking the precaution of establishing ties to other towns through marriage and the institution of *igba njo ahu* (“blood brotherhood”), left their homes and disappeared with *onye ocha* (the white man) for unknown periods of time. The roads built by the British administration with the labor of the colonized made people “go missing,” either through death, servitude, or alienation from Igbo values, rather than bringing people together for marriage or trade as the existing *ama* (pathways) did. Worse still, people who used these new roads often returned with a host of afflictions. Women of Agbaja, the Igbo town where Margaret Green lived during the early 1930s, explicitly connected the building of government roads, male travel to market centers, the influenza pandemic, and the death of women. Just before the influenza struck, Agbaja women left for neighboring towns in a strike against their husbands. Agbaja men were accused of bringing on miscarriages and the deaths of pregnant women throughout the town because the “men were going away to places like Onitsha and elsewhere and were bringing back bad medicine and were killing the women.” During 1918–1919, as noted above, influenza spread across southeastern Nigeria, killing both Europeans and Africans, but the latter in far greater numbers. A number of rumors circulated throughout the region about the affliction’s origin, among them the notion that roads served as a conveyance for disease. The participants of both the *Nwaobiala* and the *Ogu Umunwaanyi* of 1929 later echoed this sentiment.

Nonetheless, some Igbo-speaking men saw the economic potential of indigenous ventures in road transport, and many purchased bicycles and entered the transport business even as they were engaged in
Southeastern Nigerian women were more resistant to participating in the construction of or using new roads because of their special ties to the earth, markets, and the *ama* that linked periodic markets and facilitated trade and alliances between towns. Women established these pathways during their treks to and from neighboring towns. Their bodily connection to the paths through direct, physical contact with the earth made them uniquely responsible for any abomination that found its way into villages through the *ama*. Moreover, paths linked communities, just as the bodies of women fostered alliances and intimate blood ties between towns through marriage.

By contrast, the advent of ungovernable, unpurifiable roads presented a direct challenge to women’s power and interests. Government road construction, most of which was oriented towards British needs such as linking large market centers like Onitsha to the areas of palm oil production and to the railway hub at Enugu, was often at odds with women’s intervillage pathways or “bush roads.” When they did not obliterate them altogether, the new roads often traversed established trading routes, creating a situation in which two parallel systems of trade functioned simultaneously with, as Ukwu explained, “the traditional trade between nearby regions using the traditional routes and the long distance trade focused on the main road.” The colonial administration universally built new public amenities, such as schools, post offices, and dispensaries, along the main roads. Thus, “when the traditional market [was] located away from the new road, market development...often meant a move to a new site on the road.”

Not only did women as a group lose status in this shift of traffic patterns because the roads were no longer under their control, but the location of their markets changed to accommodate the new roads without the consent or agreement of those women who were the guardians of the market space. Lorry traffic could be heavy and dangerous for unwary pedestrians. Women on their way to nearby markets regularly found themselves in peril, in direct contradiction to the safety accorded them as *ndi afia* (people of the marketplace). Thus, colonial policies that took no account of female activity in the economic sphere effectively undermined women’s power inasmuch as it was connected to their role as protectors of the roads and market. Being forced to help construct “unnatural” roads, using foreign technology, added insult to what was already an injury to women’s notions of their own value.

During the *Nwaobiala*, the women consistently demanded that the “old roads” be maintained and used, and they cleared the pathways within the villages that they visited as part of their performance. The *egwu* insisted that the new roads and plans for the construction of others be abandoned and, if the old women’s paths had been closed, that they be reopened. Milne’s list of the *Nwaobiala* dancers’ demands contained an explanation of this animus against colonial road construction: “That roads made by English people should be destroyed[,] that the roads brought or causes death.” As during the influenza outbreak, the women suggested that foreign roads were literally avenues of death, meant more to consume southeastern Nigerian lives than to enable them to consume the goods of the outside world.

The women of Ideani and Alo were particularly militant in their response to these colonial inscriptions on the landscape of southeastern Nigeria. According to Niven, “The women dancers of these towns collected together and placed obstructions on one of the main Provincial Roads, they then proceeded to Nobi Court, burnt the market and filled the Court with refuse.” The women’s main targets—the government roads, court building, and market—all pointed up women’s waning influence in the region. By obstructing passage along the illicit road, burning the market to purify it, and throwing refuse into the court, the Ideani and Alo women highlighted the loci of the contamination wrought by colonial, mission, and male incursions into the world of women. As discussed below in Chapter 5, not only did these same grievances resurface in the Women’s War of 1929, but the events at Aba confirmed the link between the new roads and the death of women when several were struck by an automobile driven by a colonial employee on the road to the town.
Conclusion

The *Nwaobiala* in 1925 focused on a related set of issues, centered in large part on the growing imbalance in socioeconomic relations between men and women. These were concerns that assumed greater urgency for southeastern Nigerian women in the years that followed. As the *Nwaobiala* dancers understood in 1925, missionaries hoped that Christianity would displace indigenous religious and economic practices, just as the colonial administration undermined indigenous power structures. The power relations undergirding the colonial regime not simply affected Igbo and other southeastern Nigerian people’s formal institutions, but were inscribed upon the very landscape and the bodies of those who inhabited it. The new colonial institutions marginalized women from processes of judgment and compensation, and denied them access to official buildings and those who sat in them. Senior women watched as younger women literally wrapped themselves in the fabric of colonial rule, mission ideologies, and economic exploitation—a visible sign of the erosion of their authority over female youth. The introduction of strange commodities, ideas, and people took the form of colonial administrators, mission bicycles, “native bearers,” corvée labor for railroad and road construction, and the “motors” that “brought death” as well as goods to so many.

The *Nwaobiala* and, as we shall see, the subsequent Women’s War represented a single and historically continuous attempt to reinscribe the southeastern Nigerian landscape and the people who inhabited it through the actions of female bodies. The participants in these movements sought to decolonize southeastern Nigeria by marshaling the material and imaginative tools inherent to the *egwu*, a female performative mode already well known and used previously for protests in local contexts. The demand that “no girls or young married women should wear cloth until they were with first child, but go naked as in old days” remained constant throughout the late 1920s, and elder women expressed their outrage at young women’s seduction by western commodities during both the *Nwaobiala* and the *Ogu Umunwaanyi* of 1929. At the moment of transition into high colonialism, young women covering their bodies represented a much more provocative gesture than appearing with breasts and buttocks exposed. In 1925, senior women stripped their juniors in marketplaces all around the southeast, taking away their clothes publicly and requiring them to demonstrate once again their moral qualities through bodily display. By late 1929, it seems that many southeastern Nigerian women had grown tired of waiting for their elders, fathers, brothers, husbands, and sons to help sweep the pollution of European mercantilist firms, missionization, and colonial administration from the land. This time the demonstrators would not denude their daughters and juniors, but bare their own fertile bodies and direct their *egwu* outwards towards the colonizers as well as African men in authority, and this time in numbers too great to be ignored, silenced, or forgotten.
The Ogu Umunwaanyi

We said, ‘If it is a question of fighting, we will send for more women to come, as there are many in the country, in order that we may all submit to being killed.’

In late 1929, a new movement involving tens of thousands of women swept through Owerri and Calabar provinces in southeastern Nigeria. The participants’ grievances stemmed in large part from local warrant chiefs’ abuses of power and women’s declining political and economic position since the advent of the British-imposed native administration. Far more than the Nwaobiala dancers in 1925, their actions targeted the infrastructure and the symbols—even the sartorial trappings—of the colonial government and European businesses increasingly understood to be the instrument of their dispossession. Erupting first in the Igbo-speaking community of Oloko, the Women’s War saw the mobilization of vast numbers of southeastern Nigerian women from different linguistic groups on the basis of an inclusive gender identity and in response to a variety of threats to their interests.

Clear signs of women’s growing discontent with colonialism had, as we have seen, been manifested in 1925, and, as with the earlier dancing women’s movement, women expressed their grievances during the Ogu through established cosmological terms and actions meant to call attention to the capricious and malignant forces besiegling their world. In its scope and objectives, the Ogu of 1929 represented a colossal expansion of women’s rebellious performance in the Nwaobiala. Those who participated in the Women’s War went to great lengths to demonstrate that their grand egwu represented a movement of all mothers or female caretakers of the land and its inhabitants, and in this sense the events of late 1929 were truly unprecedented. Certainly they were regarded as such by contemporaries and by subsequent generations of southeastern Nigerian women.

Joseph Thérèse Agbasiere, for example, recounted in 2000 the various funeral rites performed for a prominent Igbo woman who had been the wife of a chief and converted to Christianity at marriage. One informant described a traditional rite that, unlike the earlier Christian funeral activities, took place on the village’s big market day (orie ukwu) and entailed the women donning “war-like attire, bearing knives and clubs.” The woman then explained that “her first experience of this ritual…was during the colonial era, when ‘women fought the white man.’” “On that particular occasion,” she recalled, “a number of women dressed up like ‘Nwa D.O.’ (i.e. the Deputy/Assistant District Officer) wearing helmets, swords and white canvas shoes,” while others “were said to have mimicked the court messengers with tattered shirts and caps askew on their heads, but bare feet. Then, so disguised, all the women danced to the music of iboria which is a widely recognized men’s war dance in that locality.” The informant’s reference to and account of “when women fought the white man” reveal both the rich symbolic content of the women’s actions in 1929 and their remarkable staying power in ritual and collective memory, particularly among women in the region.
What the British missed in 1925

In 1925, British officials took little heed of the implications of the Nwaobiala for the continued expansion of Lugardian indirect rule in southeastern Nigeria, and the movement appears to have had no impact upon mercantilist and missionary projects in the region. There were, however, unmistakable warnings in the actions of the Nwaobiala dancers of what was to come in 1929 if colonials had taken the egwu seriously on its own terms. The women demonstrated an ability to organize large numbers of people and move across the colonized landscape via their own routes, while keeping their intentions quiet and relatively undetected by official forms of surveillance and control. In a colonial situation where the British were few on the ground and thus dependent on their indigenous collaborators and paid mercenary troops, this feature alone should have given administrators pause. The gender of the Nwaobiala dancers kept the movement from impinging on, or at least remaining in, the official consciousness. Indeed, as we have noted, the official archive repressed the Nwaobiala to such an extent that subsequent scholarship has tended to ignore the movement’s obvious importance to the Ogu of 1929.

Because the colonial administration did not pursue a more extensive investigation of the women’s activities in 1925, the British remained unaware of key information about women’s power and authority in southeastern Nigeria. The Nwaobiala movement marked an important shift in gender relations and religious practice in the region: women had established at least one oracle/shrine and demanded that men recognize their authority by imposing a ritual set of gestures that were historically considered masculine preserves, such as issuing salutations on the part of a deity, making divinely-inspired demands, and implementing fines and mandatory visits to “the god at Okigwe” for recalcitrant audience members. Colonial officials’ sensitivity to the importance of oracles in this region was great—one might even say too great in many instances—so the emergence of an important new oracle under the auspices of women should have offered the administration an indication of their accelerating politicization and will for resistance. Of course, this would have required the British to recognize the centrality of southeastern women’s activities in indigenous religion more generally. Such information, however, appeared nowhere in the official reports produced by the colonial anthropologist C. K. Meek, even if it had been suggested in the earlier but officially discredited work of Northcote Thomas and addressed, at least cursorily, by the CMS missionary George Basden at the beginning of the decade. Since the Nwaobiala egwu showed clear signs of being not only a cosmological but also a more materialist critique of the colonial presence, the administration ought to have been less surprised when the reports of women’s mass mobilization and subsequent actions directed towards the sites of colonial power began to circulate in November 1929.

After all, little had occurred in the interim to ameliorate the concerns of the Nwaobiala dancers, and the amalgamation of colonial power in southeastern Nigeria was becoming daily more obvious to even the most careless of observers, which the female elders who were the chief proponents of the Nwaobiala never were. We cannot know for certain what plans women had made in the four years that separated the Nwaobiala from the Ogu Umunwaanyi, nor how they planned it, but we do have information, largely from the Aba Commission’s Notes of Evidence, that explains the pressures that mounted during the second half of the 1920s and what ultimately triggered the Ogu. In this chapter, we examine the beginning of the Ogu in Oloko, Bende Division, and discuss how first Bende women and then women across southeastern Nigeria expressed their unhappiness. The Women’s War of late 1929 involved a dramatic expansion of the tactics employed by the Nwaobiala dancers four years earlier; it saw the articulation of a more expansive notion of the collectivity of women that transcended the divisions between the communities and linguistic groups of southeastern Nigeria and linked women’s material interests to their cosmological duties as mothers of the land. The story that we can know using currently available sources begins with the growing dissatisfaction among southeastern Igbo women over the issue of proposed taxation by the colonial government, leading to a significant confrontation between an older “pagan” woman and a missionized
man, probably young enough to be her son.

“Was Your Mother Counted?” The start of the Ogu

In 1929, Captain John Cook, the assistant district officer for Owerri province, replaced his superior, Captain John Hill, who was away on leave, as district officer of Bende. After reviewing the Bende administrative records, Captain Cook deemed the nominal tax rolls from the first census taken in 1927 to be insufficiently detailed and instructed local warrant chiefs to re-do their counts in mid-October. Cook seems to have been interested particularly in information pertaining to women, children, and the domestic animals locally considered to be women’s property. He later told the Aba Commission of Inquiry that he had been careful to explain to the chiefs that this new count had “no connexion with any tax on women.” Whether this was a retrospective addition to the instructions or a problem of translation—or the warrant chiefs perceived this new count to be an opportunity to further enrich themselves at the expense of the village populations under their control—rumors that women were to be counted and taxed quickly spread throughout Owerri and Calabar provinces. Afigbo reported that “Chief Ananaba of Umuala in Oloko solemnly declared before a meeting of the elders of his village that the government ordered him to count women and animals ‘so that they would be taxed’…As soon as the meeting dispersed this new counting became common talk.”

It is unclear from available records exactly when local Igbo women first began to gather to discuss the possibility of imminent taxation, but Gailey stated that in the week following Cook’s October 14th meeting with the chiefs, “women held village meetings at Umuosu, Mbwpongo, and elsewhere in the court area. Leaders of the women in Oloko called a general meeting of women at the Orie market.” These early gatherings most likely sparked other meetings as the word filtered through women’s networks that the taxation of women had been threatened in the Oloko native court. The women’s subsequent testimony before the Aba Commission suggests that they developed an agreed-upon strategy to deal with the threat and resolved to take action should the rumors be true. Ikodia, a woman from Ugbebele, told the commissioners, “We, women…held a large meeting, at which we decided to wait until we heard definitely from one person that women were to be taxed, in which case we would make trouble, as we did not mind being killed for doing so.” Unlike during the Nwaobiala egwu, these meetings drew both missionized and “pagan” as well as older and younger women, although it appears (as will be discussed further below) that these intra-gendered divisions remained important and led to separate, if coordinated, meeting groups in each village. Meetings like the one described above were replicated in most sizable villages and probably all of the market centers in ready communication distance from Oloko. At this point, the women did not propose immediate action because of their unwillingness to move on the basis of what was still rumor. Instead, it appears that they decided to wait for the first incidence of counting, for the actual moment when they would be called upon to redress the nso ani (abomination against the land) of enumerating women and their possessions.

Sometime on the morning of November 23, 1929, a senior woman named Nwanyeruwa was occupied extracting palm oil in the ilo of her husband’s compound in Oloko village when the arrival of Mark Emeruwa, a Christian, former schoolmaster, and current employee of Oloko’s warrant chief, Okugo Okezie, interrupted this domestic task. Wary of being involved personally in the controversial act of counting women, Okugo had delegated the task of updating Oloko’s tax rolls in accordance with Captain Cook’s instructions to the underemployed Emeruwa. What transpired next remained a matter of dispute between the parties in their testimony before the Aba Commission. According to the census taker, he first tried to see Nwanyeruwa’s husband, Ojim, about the matter of taxation, but the latter brushed him aside and told him to see the women. Nwanyeruwa reported that Emeruwa simply appeared before her and
demanded that she count her “goats, sheep and people.” By her own account, Nwanyeruwa then retorted, “Are you still counting? Last year my son’s wife who was pregnant died. I am still mourning the death of that woman. Was your mother counted?” Nwanyeruwa imputed a double loss of life to the first census, demonstrating her (and many other women’s) contention that counting human beings somehow interfered with fertility and reproductive life. Nwanyeruwa framed her reproach in one of the usual styles of Igbo female-to-male insult. By bringing up Emeruwa’s mother in an unflattering, indeed abominable, context, she suggested that he was the product of abomination. This style of feminine insult would recur throughout the ensuing Ogu.12

As a result of this exchange, an altercation ensued between the two, forcing Nwanyeruwa to call for the assistance of her co-wife. Emeruwa, now facing the prospect of two furious women, hurriedly left the compound to report the incident to Chief Okugo. Again accounts differed regarding what happened next, but Nwanyeruwa claimed that Okugo had her brought before him, chastised her, and insisted that she should pay tax whether she liked it or not. After this confrontation, the elder woman made her way to the Oloko Orie market where some Christian women were holding a meeting or “feast” after church. Even though they were not her agemates and were Christians to boot, Nwanyeruwa called out to these women, recounting how Emeruwa had tried to count women and saying that Okugo had personally threatened her for resisting the count and told her that women were to be taxed. Outraged by this news, the missionized women eventually marched to the compound of their co-religionist, Mark Emeruwa, and proceeded to “sing and dance for him.” After forcing Emeruwa and his entire household to escape into the mission compound, the Christian women returned to Orie market, where they continued to sing and dance throughout the night, drawing a larger and larger crowd as the evening progressed.

At an early hour the next morning, the excited crowd of women decided to march on Chief Okugo’s compound. Once there, they began to “sit on” the household by singing and dancing in the compound’s open spaces. Rather than attending to the women’s demands and attempting to explain the counting, Okugo allowed the people of his household to become involved in a pitched battle with the egwu performers. Several women were injured in the skirmish, including one woman named Enyidie who later claimed that she miscarried as the result of a blow from a stick. Word of the attack on the local dancers circulated through the markets in Oloko and surrounding areas, and several thousand women from neighboring towns filtered into Oloko in the days that followed. After his return from leave, Captain Hill arrested Okugo, who was subsequently convicted of assault and sentenced to two years imprisonment.

As news of the events at Oloko and Nwanyeruwa’s successful case against Okugo spread beyond Owerri province into Calabar, reports of sporadic incidences of violence on the part of large crowds of women—some estimated in the tens of thousands—began to circulate among colonial administrators and throughout the ranks of the warrant chiefs, court messengers, and native police. One episode that particularly haunted colonial officials occurred in Aba, after a local doctor felt compelled by his fear for a European female passenger to run down members of the crowd in his automobile. Irate at the injury and possible death of at least two women, a large number of women gathered in the town attacked commercial and colonial buildings with abandon, thereby giving the movement its colonial name, the “Aba Riots.”15

Although the use of the term “riots” seems quite ominous, Women’s War participants directed their “violence” exclusively towards material property rather than people, European or otherwise. Crowds of women often compelled warrant chiefs to hand over their caps, the sartorial symbol of their position within the colonial regime and an important marker of colonized status intended to mimic and supercede the ankle strings, eagle feathers, horsetails, and fans of indigenously approved male title-takers. There was a colonial precedent for such actions: British officials regularly defrocked warrant chiefs judged unsuitable by relieving them of their caps and staffs. As Afigbo noted, “To be deprived of one’s cap or staff was an obvious disgrace, a proof that the victim had been found wanting in certain respects. But to
lose one’s warrant was a more serious affair.” Excluded from the colonial hierarchy, indigenous women obviously could not revoke the warrant of the oppressive chiefs, but they could—and did—seize the tangible symbols of chiefly power, those closest to Igbo-speaking people’s own symbolic system, the despised red felt caps. Women also destroyed or laid claim to the personal property of chiefs whose caps they confiscated, eating the yams in their carefully arranged yam barn displays and, as one chief plaintively told the Aba Commissioners, even using the grass mats from his own roof to roast them. The freeing of chiefs’ domestic livestock—a form of wealth often accumulated at the expense of local women—was another popular and highly symbolic form of punishment employed by the women during the demonstrations.

These offenses, no matter how inconvenient and embarrassing to the warrant chiefs and their followers, were of less concern to colonial officials than the women’s determined assaults upon native court buildings and European trading centers, the “factories” where palm oil was exchanged for British currency or tokens that could be used in mercantile shops. Indeed, officials ordered some of the first fatal shots fired upon southeastern Nigerian women in defense of British property. According to Perham’s rather skewed account of the events of December 15th:

At Utu-Etim-Ekpo appeared crowds of women scantily dressed in sackcloth, their faces smeared with charcoal, sticks wreathed with young palms in their hands, while heads were bound with young ferns. It is interesting to note that no Europeans understood the exact significance of these last symbols though nearly all the native witnesses assumed that they meant war. They burned the Native Court and sacked and looted the ‘factory’ (European store) and clerks’ houses. They declared that the District Officer was born of a woman, and as they were women they were going to see him. Police and troops were sent, and as, on two occasions, the women ran towards them with frenzied shouts, fire was opened with a Lewis gun as well as with rifles, and eighteen women were killed and nineteen wounded.

On the day following the incident at Utu Etim Ekpo, an even larger crowd of women from several southeastern linguistic groups gathered at the riverine port town of Opobo chanting, “What is the smell? Death is the smell.” This crowd, after holding meetings in various venues around town, marched on the district office, demanding written statements from the district officer to the effect that the women would not be taxed and that women were unhappy about the taxation of men, along with various other grievances, many to do with market issues. While copies of the demands were being typed and distributed to segments of the assembled women, the group grew restive. Some women began to push upon the fence separating them from the district office and to use some of the “abusive language” which they had directed previously towards colonial officials as the women moved through Opobo and environs before December 16. According to the accounts of the British officials on the scene, when the fence gave way, the lieutenant in charge decided to fire into the crowd to stop its advance. At least thirty-nine women perished and many more were injured, including the single male victim of the Ogu, an unfortunate Yoruba businessman who was passing by when the shots were fired. No Europeans were killed or even badly injured during the month that the women “rioted,” and, by December 20, officials reported to their superiors in the Colonial Office that matters were “back in hand,” even though some protests inspired by the Ogu continued well into 1930.

“Death Is the Smell”

In the years prior to 1929, it became clear to Igbo and other southeastern women that their social position within the new institutions undergirding colonialism was worsening compared to that of men. The colonial state and European trading interests had made decisions affecting the marketplace that took it out of women’s hands and placed it in the hands of men they did not know and to whom they had little access. The precipitous decline in palm oil prices after 1927 represented a particular source of concern, which
was exacerbated by the concomitant rise in the prices of imported but increasingly necessary commodities. Before 1927, many women became involved in various aspects of the palm kernel and oil trade, so the abrupt drop in prices affected women’s income throughout southeastern Nigeria, perhaps even more than their male counterparts. What is more, women could not understand why their foreign trading partners now devalued goods of the same or better quality as those previously offered. The recent change in methods of evaluation for palm kernel and oil products deepened their suspicion. In 1926 European trading houses introduced a system whereby they purchased palm products by weight rather than by measure, and in 1928 they finally implemented produce inspection, which had been on the colonial books for almost a decade and was based on standards that were never discussed with or even described to women. Since women, as Martin has related, commonly adulterated their palm kernels and oil with water or a combination of water and potash, the new inspection policy cut significantly into their profits. Measurement by weight and the transformed procedures of the male produce inspectors made little sense to women traders who, as far as they were aware, brought the same amounts of produce to market but found themselves being paid in seemingly arbitrary and much smaller amounts of cash.

To make matters worse, none of these new transactions took place in the women’s open and transparent market space. The additional requirement that business transactions take place within the narrow confines of the mercantile “factories”—European-style buildings where inspection, evaluation, and payment were conducted and controlled by men—accompanied the increased regulation of the palm oil and kernel trade and curtailed bargaining. The transcription of these proceedings in English on the “paper” (akukwo) that now ruled so tyrannically over the lives of all illiterate southern Nigerians further obscured the very rules by which goods were evaluated. The freedom and movement of women’s afia (market space) was clearly in jeopardy, along with their once defining status as ndi afia (people of the marketplace). The transition from the freely circulating, open, and public spaces of the markets to closed, privatized, and restricted “factories” probably struck the women of southeastern Nigeria as only too familiar. Where once cases had been open to all, and everyone knew by what rules those cases would be judged, now warrant chiefs sat in judgment inside colonial native court buildings or within the private, highly masculine spaces of their own compounds. Women had no recourse except to higher British authorities, and it is doubtful whether they considered that a viable option given that they had never received a jot of consideration from the new colonial “masters.” As can be seen from the testimony to the Aba Commission, women in particular suffered under the new legal system because they lacked the connections to the colonial administration that some of their male counterparts had established. Rural women’s illiteracy and inability to gain employment in the new administration prevented them from forming ties to colonial agencies, while concomitantly keeping women less aware of new government policies or their import.

According to the women who testified before the Aba Commission, warrant chiefs and other “native administrators” regularly outraged them by taking local girls as wives without paying the normal bridewealth fees; confiscating women’s domestic animals and produce on the slightest pretext; requiring funds from women and their organizations for unspecified, often spurious community projects; and keeping women’s returned bridewealth in divorce cases rather than repaying it to their husbands, thereby rendering divorces invalid in the eyes of most villagers. Nwudaru of Owerrinta complained bitterly to the commission about this last point, emphasizing that such cases were no longer heard publicly but in seclusion, “taken to the chiefs’ houses” rather than being discussed in the open spaces of the town. “The chiefs in whose houses cases of divorce are settled,” she maintained, “don’t treat us properly. Generally speaking, the former husbands of wives whose divorce cases are taken to chiefs’ houses for settlement don’t get back their dowries because the chiefs keep them.” Besides rendering divorced women’s marital status extremely ambiguous and preventing some of these women from remarrying, the warrant
chiefs who grew rich off bridewealth not generated by their own daughters’ marriages destabilized the delicate alliance relations between lineages and even whole towns. This impoverished the mothers, fathers’ mothers, and fathers’ sisters of these divorced women, who contributed to the general bridewealth and expected to reap the benefits of bridewealth brought back into their marital and paternal compounds through other marriages. Instead, these senior women saw their contributions disappearing into the strongboxes of the local intermediaries of the colonial regime. The stigma of “uselessness,” a serious charge for patrilineages forced to marry “strangers” (i.e. exogamously), followed lineages that failed to return bridewealth after divorce for whatever reason. If potential allies investigated a lineage and learned that it did not return bridewealth in previous marriage transactions, there was little hope that a new match would take place.

In cases of warrant chiefs’ interference with bridewealth, then, unrelated men with privileged access to the colonial system monitored and even co-opted women’s productive and reproductive activities. This also posed cosmological dangers because people throughout the southeastern region believed that the improper payment of bridewealth had a direct and negative impact on women’s fertility. By interfering with women’s juridical and economic rights, the colonial system undermined the safeguards of bridewealth prestation that were considered necessary to maintain social boundaries around the powerful, procreative bodies of wives and mothers.

The importance of southeastern women’s bodies for the *Ogu*, as for the *Nwaobiala*, cannot be overemphasized. Southeastern Nigerian cosmologies and political cultures, particularly those of Igbo-speaking peoples, consisted of systems of interdependence; within these, women’s “goodness” (*mma*: wealth, health, productive and reproductive capacities) was tied directly to the central market space. Thus, women in the 1920s believed that the transformation of local society by the incursion of the British threatened their physical as well as fiscal well-being. Increased palm kernel and oil production and decreasing male participation in the production of staple crops, most notably yams, or in male fishing activities coincided with the introduction of mercantilist “factories” throughout the southeast. At the same time, missionary activities encouraged women to take on new roles in monogamous marriage and the “Christian home.” These precepts, however, left little room for the sort of preparation for life as colonized subjects that their brothers and husbands received, while the requirements of mission piety proved antithetical to women’s historical and important religious roles throughout the region.

With the advent of a fully elaborated colonial administration, women found themselves excluded from the new legal system yet subjected to its machinations at every turn. Their contributions were devalued on a number of fronts, which struck at their perceived usefulness as individuals and eroded all of their productive capacities in material terms. Igbo and other southeastern women felt an almost visceral attack upon their persons from these depredations. Whereas many men—whether European, other African, or local—visibly reaped the rewards from women’s difficulties, women apparently concluded that the situation called for drastic measures to redress the imbalance in gender relations.

The women’s demonstrations constituted a “this-worldly” expression of the cosmological chaos of a social landscape where “things fall apart” because one segment of the population unjustly dominated the other. As noted previously, women destroyed or damaged only property, but this was hardly random destruction. The warring women targeted property—like the areas chosen for sweeping during the *Nwaobiala*—that belonged to men and symbolized the new masculine order. Property that served to exclude women or to circumscribe their activities within privatized, masculine spaces attracted their wrath: warrant chiefs’ compounds; native court buildings; fences around mercantile, colonial, and some mission buildings; railroad and telegraph stations; and European shops, banks, and “factories.” By comparison, mission churches, hospitals, and schools—all locations that women and their children attended regularly—remained relatively unscathed. Warrant chiefs’ compounds had become the scenes of
humiliation at the hands of the new administration for many women. Native court buildings effectively sequestered the hearings of cases affecting women’s lives and placed them under the direct control of men whose authority derived not from local people but the foreign powers of literacy and “government.” Fences amounted to barricades that either blocked women from easy access to those in authority or restricted the historically open *afia*. European shops sold not only dangerous new commodities like cloth, liquor, and guns but also household goods and packaged foodstuffs that made women’s weaving, pottery, and food production less attractive to consumers. The European “factories” took the products of women’s labor and, in exchange, returned increasingly smaller amounts of an alien currency, which was used primarily for paying colonial taxes and fines. If the native courts and the practices of appointed chiefs undermined the social transparency of legal disputes, the intrusion of European trading stations and the recent interest of local men (encouraged by mercantilists and administrators alike) in taking up trade as a form of employment destroyed the feminine sociability of the markets. Men who were educated by the missions or owed their positions of authority to the colonial administration now presided over what should have been women’s affairs in the native courts, while male clerks, whether Africans from other colonies like Sierra Leone or Europeans, managed affairs within the new mercantilist buildings, especially the banks springing up all around the southeast which catered largely to European businessmen and colonial officials. Such buildings made manifest women’s exclusion under the new colonial order. For southeastern Nigerian women, they were defined by what could not take place in their confines—women’s meetings where news and goods could be exchanged, women’s ritual power expressed and, indeed, where women’s opinions mattered.

Unlike the old *afia* (market space) where bodies, goods, and talk circulated freely, walls or fences surrounded these new masculine spaces, which usually had one entrance and one exit only. Men, often strangers, assessed the products of women’s labor using unknown standards, paid for them in foreign coin, and took them away to an equally mysterious destination. In the courts, men decided cases against women, usually without bothering to take women’s testimony, then issued their decisions in English writing, a form of communication opaque to the majority of southeastern women even after fifty years of mission activity. Men also enforced the decisions of the courts, whether in the form of fines, detention, or “collective punishment.” Together, these changes were transforming the social world of southeastern Nigerian women into something that looked, from inside it, like a giant lineage compound: a space where the value of women’s production and reproduction would be measured not by women themselves, but by an elite group of men whose numbers seemed to grow yearly and always at women’s expense.

By late 1929, southeastern Nigerian women felt enclosed in a number of ways. Not only had the land “changed” to the point that what had expressly been women’s affairs now lay in the hands of men, but the marketplace, that quintessentially female-dominated space, could no longer be said to belong to women at all. Southeastern Nigerian women’s reaction to the rumor that women were to be counted and taxed must be read within this larger context. Many in the region, particularly Igbo-speaking peoples, believed that the counting of human beings was dangerous to the proliferation of humanity. As the bearers of children for their marital patrilineages, women played a vital and widely recognized part in the continuation of human life. If women died prematurely, they took with them all the unborn children in their wombs, and the numerous references to the death or injury of pregnant women in the testimony before the Aba Commission spoke directly to this anxiety. Seen as “the trees that bear fruit,” and therefore linked to the fertility of the land, any threat to women represented a threat to *uwa mmadu* (the world of human beings).

In addition to southeastern Nigerian women’s religious and personal objections to being counted, the prospect of being taxed directly and having to pay more money to “government” angered them. Yet the women’s subsequent testimony articulated an underlying logic to the protest against taxation that was not merely about the importance of cash in a transforming economy. Did women not do enough already, they
suggested, in bearing children and feeding their families through labor in their gardens, other productive activities, and in the marketplace? In her remarks before the Aba Commission, Enyidia of Mbiopongo, seconded by the many women present at the time, stated that her “principal complaint” was men’s “counting in order to tax women. Women come in contact with men, become pregnant and bring forth children. Such useful women are now being asked to pay tax.” While men had a cosmological duty to provide for the basic maintenance of women, the latter had important responsibilities as well, such as satisfying all of the other needs of their uterine households. Women had a sacred obligation as well as an economic one to the public space of the marketplace, just as men were supposed to uphold the purity of their lineages through the careful husbandry of resources and ritual practices within their compounds. Throughout the late 1920s, women already assisted in amassing the hard-to-come-by currency for men’s taxes, and, in a world where their personal profits were increasingly under assault, they did not understand why their few treasured possessions should be taxed and more money should be given over to men for what were manifestly men’s interests.

The counting and putative taxation of women in late 1929 suggested that there was a colonial male conspiracy to kill women and destroy their fertility. Such a conspiracy represented the ultimate abomination in the cosmology of Igbo-speaking peoples, where gender complementarity was the norm, thus requiring a serious form of redress. The egwu that began in November 1929 presented precisely that redress—in the form of enormous groups of women, naked or wearing “short and tight” clothing, carrying or wearing palm and young fern fronds, and singing songs that would scorch the ears of local male auditors and unnerve colonial soldiers and administrators.

“Go and Show Us the Man Who Has Said This Thing”: Oloko and After

The incident that ultimately sparked the Women’s War occurred on the morning of November 23, when, as mentioned above, Mark Emeruwa entered the compound of Ojim in Oloko with the intention of redoing the census data for the village on behalf of Captain Cook and the local warrant chief, Okugo Okezie. Inside the compound walls, Emeruwa met Ojim’s second wife Nwanyeruwa, who, by her own testimony, was engaged in productive activity, “pounding palm nuts...[and] then squeezing the oil.” He asked her to enumerate the livestock and people who inhabited the compound. However, the two offered differing accounts of what happened next in their testimony before the Aba Commission. Nwanyeruwa said that she angered Emeruwa by pointing out that there had been deaths in the compound already as a result of colonial counting, then insulting his mother (and, by extension, himself) in asking, “Was your mother counted?” According to Nwanyeruwa, this insult enraged the enumerator to such an extent that he seized her by the throat and attempted to throttle her. In the struggle, her hands, smeared with the oil, soiled his garments.

Emeruwa, by contrast, reported to the commissioners that he had counted his own compound and placed this information in the book given him by one of Cook’s officials, Mr. Anyanwu, before moving on to the next. There he spoke with Ojim, the compound’s owner, who offered him neither resistance nor help. When he approached Nwanyeruwa and told her of his errand, she unfairly assaulted him and, in the ensuing melee, smeared sticky, red, raw palm oil over his western-style, and therefore prestigious and valuable, clothing. The schoolmaster also added that, in a conciliatory gesture, some women of the compound offered to take his clothing and wash it, “as I was only acting as the messenger.”

Both parties clearly understood the poetics of the encounter, and each attempted to present his or her “case” to the Aba Commission using those poetics. From Nwanyeruwa’s point of view, she had inscribed, quite literally, the fruits of the land and women’s productive labor onto the commodified sign of European education and employment, clothing worn by a man fully co-opted into the colonial system. Mark
Emeruwa, however, presented himself as modern, rational, and obedient in carrying out his bureaucratic duties by emphasizing that he began by counting his own compound, implying that he, in contrast to Ojim, had control over its inhabitants. For him, an “uncivilized” and superstitious “pagan” woman attacked him and dirtied some of his most precious possessions with her (highly feminine) cooking ingredients, disrespecting him and his masculine attainments. The qualities of raw palm oil, which is thick, red, almost ineradicable from cloth, and like bloodstains to the eye in appearance, was also an important part of the symbolic struggle between the two in their testimony. The commissioners, however, did not seem to appreciate or even to be interested particularly in the nuances of the carefully crafted narratives laid before them, and the otherwise fraught question of the soiled outfit passed without significant question or comment to either.

After telling the story of his ruined colonial attire to the commission, Emeruwa then testified that he told the helpful women, “Never mind,” and made a dignified retreat from Ojim’s compound, while Nwanyeruwa noted with some pleasure that she chased him away, “shouting.” Whereas the former reflected the Igbo masculine ideal of self-containment and the respect that women owed men, Nwanyeruwa’s account spoke to Igbo feminine notions of militancy and the power of women’s voices to affect change. Both witnesses agreed that Emeruwa’s next stop was the compound of his social superior, Okugo, where he showed his soiled clothing and gave his version of the morning’s events to the warrant chief and others assembled there.

Nwanyeruwa testified that she knew the time had come for the drastic measures contemplated previously among women when Okugo summoned her to his compound and assured her that she would pay the tax. The tone of Okugo’s rebuke, as she reported it, left little doubt as to the seriousness of this new masculine threat to women’s lives. “When I came before him,” she told the Aba Commission, “I said, ‘My father, what have I done?’ He said, ‘Woman, dared you assault my messenger and soil him with oil? If you have yams you had better go and eat them, as your own matter is over, that is you will get into trouble. When the District Officer comes, he will take charge of you.’” The statement about the yams represented an obvious threat to any Igbo-speaker. The message that Okugo conveyed in his suggestion that she should go and eat her yams, which ordinarily would be stored and rationed out carefully between harvests, was ominous in the extreme and much worse than its gloss above (“your matter is over”), probably added by the translator for the benefit of the commissioners. A more accurate translation in colloquial English would be to say that she was “dead meat.” Okugo told her in essence that she was beyond local help; she had transgressed colonial law and now the British administration would punish her directly. A threat of this nature would have produced great anxiety among the colonized, especially women, since they generally did not understand the British legal system and its sanctions. It is entirely possible that Nwanyeruwa understood Okugo’s threat to mean the death penalty.

Chief Okugo offered a different version of what passed between them on the morning of November 24. He swore to the Aba Commission that he never threatened the older woman. Rather, he had been conciliatory: “I said to her, ‘Don’t worry about it. I told Mark to go to men and not to women. Overlook the mistake that has been made. Don’t worry.’” Again, this was quite the opposite of Nwanyeruwa’s account. In reassuring an unhappy woman that a younger man had overstepped his authority and that he would mediate between the two, Okugo characterized his behavior as that befitting a benevolent male elder in Igbo terms, while at the same time casting himself as a judicious ruler before colonial officials. Both Nwanyeruwa and Okugo’s representations of the confrontation would have appeared credible and well within the conventions of Igbo gendered discourse, but it seems likely that only a perceived deadly threat would have sent Nwanyeruwa into the marketplace to rouse the local women and begin the chain of events that ignited the Ogu.

It is certainly significant that after the encounter with Chief Okugo in his compound Nwanyeruwa
decided that the time had come for women to mobilize. Oloko women of various ages and from several different social groups testified to the Aba Commission that they had decided earlier to wait until one of their number knew for certain that women would be taxed. Nwanyeruwa confirmed this when she told women assembled at the Oloko Eke market: “‘Hear what Okugo has told me—he said that I would get into trouble. I was in my house when Emeruwa came there and asked me to do counting. Now Okugo has told me that mine is over and that I will get into trouble.’”

The women meeting in Oloko Eke were, by the testimony, Christians and younger than Nwanyeruwa, but they were as determined as their elder to resist the counting of human beings and the taxation of women.

Since Mark Emeruwa had been the first man to attempt to count women, the group from the market went straight to his father’s compound and proceeded to “sit on” Emeruwa. They also sent word to other women in the Oloko village-group and cut palm fronds as a marker of the dangerous conflict at hand, sending these on to relations, friends, and trade associates in the markets of neighboring towns. The palm frond message signified that Ohandum (the collective group of all women/wives) was “moving” and that women were obligated to join in the movement however they could. While the crowd of women around the compound of Emeruwa’s father grew steadily over the course of the evening, even more women flowed into the Oloko Eke market from the surrounding areas in response to the palm frond signal. As Nwanyeruwa and other female elders began to collect food and cook for the incoming women warriors, most of the men of Oloko made themselves scarce, including Ojim, Nwanyeruwa’s husband. It appears that the only Oloko women who were not in the marketplace or at Emeruwa’s home that evening were the infirm, some who were pregnant or with children too small to be left behind, a few missionized women, and a very small number of the wives of colonial functionaries like Emeruwa and Okugo. The meeting in Oloko Eke marked the beginning of the gathering of Ohandum, the women of all towns, the active and motivated female public, but Ohandum would have a much greater distance to cover before it reached its conclusion.

Ohandum thus began its grand egwu (song/dance) in two significant locations in Oloko: within the Oloko Eke market, where women from outside the town gathered to eat, hear the news from female elders like Nwanyeruwa, and determine their strategy; and outside the compound of Mark Emeruwa’s father, where a group of Oloko women immediately went to address the local culprit who wished to count people. According to Emeruwa’s testimony, the women who “sat on” him proceeded in the usual manner to surround his father’s compound, dance, and sing a number of ribald and abusive songs. When questioned by the commissioners about the content of these songs, he said that he could not “repeat” what the women were singing. The women’s songs most likely contained what to British or missionized ears were highly salacious lyrics, which called into question Mark Emeruwa’s sexual prowess or proclivities.

Although a Christian and literate to some degree in English, Mark Emeruwa was not so alienated from his own culture that he failed to understand the women’s intentions when they arrived and began the egwu. The sheer numbers of women “sitting on” him alone demonstrated the extent of his offense. Normally, the assembled women would have expected him to make an appearance, listen to their complaints, apologize, and pay a fine assessed by them. Instead, he took flight, running with his wife and children to the nearby mission compound. Emeruwa obviously hoped that the dancing women, many of whom he must have recognized from his church, would not follow them to the mission. Since this was a period when feelings were running high between “traditionalists” and newly missionized Christians all over the Nigerian southeast, he had some reason to feel confident that women who characterized themselves as Christians would not violate the sanctity of the mission compound with “pagan” songs and dances. It appears that this was indeed the case, although the dancing women simply returned to the Oloko Eke market to take part in the egwu there. Since the mission compound was located on the edge of the marketplace, Emeruwa (and, we suppose, the missionaries) continued to hear the offending songs throughout the night.
While the *egwu* went on in Oloko Eke, women of the town and their compatriots from neighboring villages developed strategies to escalate what was becoming an *ogu* (war). The women alternated between planning for the next day and singing and dancing throughout the night. The combination of dancing and discussion was a common practice for Igbo women who were “sitting on man.” As the anthropologist Margaret Green described an *egwu* she attended in 1935: “Dancing started as soon as the party arrived at Ng.’s house and was of an apparently impromptu nature. Anyone seemed to be able to start a dance and as she started, those around would clap and others would join in. Then there would be a lull with much loud talk and discussion, after which someone would spring up again with a new dance.”

While discussion and dancing intermingled at Oloko Eke, few, except for those elder women who were in charge of feeding the growing crowd went back to their husbands’ compounds. Most stayed in the marketplace, which became their home for the duration of the demonstration. Always a feminine space for Igbo-speaking people, the market (*afia*) at Oloko now became hyper-feminized and, as such, forbidden to men. Indeed, none of the men from Oloko who testified before the Aba Commission went to Oloko Eke to speak with or even observe the women, and as in Ojim’s case many of the town’s male inhabitants found a reason to leave or close up their compounds once the *egwu* began in earnest.

On November 26, a deputation from the women of Oloko went to see the acting district officer, Captain Cook, at Bende and reported the actions of Emeruwa and Okugo. The next day, another group of women visited the district office and informed Cook that women from Bende, Aba, Owerri, and Ikot Ekpene divisions had converged on Okugo’s compound. Cook dispatched his police sergeant to reassure the women that the government had no intention of taxing them, then traveled to Oloko himself, where—as Lieutenant Governor C. T. Lawrence put it in his report on the “disturbances”—“he found an orderly meeting of about 1,000 women in the market place.” For two days Cook attempted to assuage the women’s concerns as more poured in from neighboring areas. On December 2, after returning from leave and relieving Cook, Captain Hill arrested Okugo on the charge of assaulting some of the women, at least nine of whom had sustained injuries from sticks, whips, and arrows.

The ever-expanding group of women then marched from Oloko to Bende to attend the proceedings that followed, gathering even more strength along the way. By the time they arrived at the district administrative headquarters, the women numbered roughly 4,000, although their general demeanor remained good-natured. Ikonnia, Nwugo, and Nwannedie, three leaders chosen by the women of Oloko for their speaking abilities, introduced themselves and their case to Hill through his wife. Having learned that Hill’s wife was present, the women appealed to her to arrange a meeting with her husband. This appeal through or to other women became common in the *Ogu Umunwaanyi* over the next month and during the women’s testimony to the Aba Commission. Even when trying to see or speak to men, the women often stated that, since the men were born of women, they had every right to deal with them. As Hill later told the Aba Commission, “In the evening my wife got a note from the leaders and three of them came into my house and we discussed the whole thing. They said if I would try Okugo’s case, they would take the women out of town. I said three women could not do it, but they said they would.”

Surprised by the women’s representatives and their ability to restore order in Bende, Captain Hill allowed some of the women to attend Okugo’s trial, so long as they remained orderly and most of them stayed outside in the area surrounding the Bende court compound. On December 4, Okugo was tried, convicted, and sentenced to two years imprisonment; under continued pressure from the women, Hill surrendered Okugo’s cap of office to them on December 22. Thus, both Captains Cook and Hill proved responsive to women’s demands. The *egwu* also impressed local men, even if many of them were disgruntled by the women’s success. The women themselves were sure that they now would be able to make themselves heard.

Captain Hill kept the three “leaders” of the movement in Bende in order to learn more about the
organization of women. When he heard of trouble in Umuahia, he beseeched them to use their influence with the women there. At first, the Oloko women seemed unable to do so, and Hill and his wife traveled to the town to address the situation in person. Apparently, Hill had learned from the experience at Bende, since he brought his female liaison (his wife, who remained unnamed in the testimony and never testified) with him. By the time the Hills arrived, however, the women at Umuahia were calm, owing to the intervention of the Oloko women. As Hill stated in his testimony, “The Oloko women had done what they said and cleared Umuahia.”

This willingness to help continued after the events at Oloko, Bende, and Umuahia. On December 13, at the height of the Women’s War, women representing Oloko reportedly sent a telegram to the “rioting” women in Aba who engaged in some of the more aggressive protests. It read, in part, “evils that they are doing that’s not our objects the tax matter is settled to our satisfaction nothing like houses destroying in Oloko where tax matters first started.”

However satisfied the Oloko and neighboring women may have been with Chief Okugo’s subsequent imprisonment for assault—and, ultimately, this must remain an open issue, since Oloko women’s leaders had to help scrape together cash fines as part of the collective punishment imposed by Captain Hill, and Nwanyeruwa along with the rest of the leadership would be coerced to attend the Aba Commission at Umudike—they could not be everywhere, nor could they truthfully tell all women in the southeast that the “tax matter” had been resolved. Indeed, it appears that Nwanyeruwa, whatever her personal interest in acting as a peacemaker after the settlement of Okugo’s case, became a heroine to other women in the southeast for her stand against enumeration and taxation. As the woman who first sounded the alarm about taxation, Nwanyeruwa and the women of Oloko in general became central figures for subsequent movements. Women from villages too far from Oloko to have participated in the first egwu came to visit Nwanyeruwa and the Oloko marketplace, returning home with inspiration and sometimes a more tangible sign of the pilgrimage in the form of a letter. One such letter read, in Igbo, “Nwanyeruwa of Oloko proper said that the D.O. said women will not pay tax till the world end…that Chiefs were not to exist any more and that was the voice of all the women.” Nwebeme of Amabo testified that the “charm” she took back to her village from Nwanyeruwa’s compound read simply, “Nwanyeruwa has taken Okugo’s cap.” In return these women paid 10 shillings for every village represented and signed a petition on behalf of the women of their community, appropriating in almost every respect the despised techniques of the colonial administration. The petition, according to Nwebeme, stated that “we, the women, are not to pay tax until the end of the world, and that the chiefs were not to exist anymore, and that that was the voice of all women.”

While the letters became treasured talismans to some, they were not sufficient to dissuade other women from taking up the new egwu now that the signal had in effect been given.

Although the large crowds at Bende and Umuahia dispersed peaceably, Hill did not know at the time that the Ogu Umunwaanyi had moved far afield through the market networks. To make matters worse, the resident of Calabar province, Edward Falk, had issued instructions to all his officers to obtain a recount of “the population of each unit of taxation,” which began in late November as well, reinforcing the fears provoked by the Oloko incident. Even the members of the Aba Commission of Inquiry later conceded that although “it was not and it never was the intention of Government to impose a tax upon women in the Calabar and Owerri Provinces,…every action in the matter of this re-assessment pointed to such an intention.”

Despite what the local women accepted as a satisfactory resolution to the events at Oloko, the Ogu Umunwaanyi spread rapidly across much of Owerri province and into Ikot Ekpene, Abak, and Opobo in Calabar province during the weeks that followed. Under the assumption that the tactics employed in Oloko and Bende would be successful elsewhere, women marched throughout the region. Problems began to occur, however, as women discovered that not all colonial officials would listen to their complaints with as much equanimity as Captain Hill and that all warrant chiefs could not be deposed as easily as Okugo. Nevertheless, many of the chiefs did have their caps taken away from them in other
areas, and even more had their compounds taken over by groups of women who “sat on” them and inflicted a form of “popular taxation,” the eating of their yams and the taking of their domestic fowl.

As large groups of women festooned in palm leaves, with chalk on their faces, and carrying staffs—the dress of women carrying out serious ritual activities—emerged throughout southeastern Nigeria, British officials increasingly greeted them with force rather than a willingness to listen to their grievances. Although the women in Oloko did not cause major damage to either Okugo’s compound or the native court, in other areas women wreaked havoc on warrant chiefs’ compounds, tearing the grass mats off their roofs to roast confiscated yams and pulling down storage sheds. Buildings linked to the colonial administration or European trading interests, especially the native courts, also became common targets. Even at Oloko, where the native court was spared, the women discussed pulling it down.

Nwamuo, a participant in the Oloko egwu, explained to the Aba Commission why some women destroyed government property: “They said that they wanted to destroy property generally so that all Whitemen might go home, because if they went home there would be no question of tax being paid.” There was a clear logic to the destruction of property during the Women’s War as illustrated by what the women chose to attack. In Bamenda, women stormed the native court building with sticks and beat the walls while singing and dancing; women at Ayaba completely destroyed the local court. As Enyeremaka, an Ihie woman who participated in the assault on the latter, told the Aba Commission: “We went to Ayaba Court from the market, and told the chiefs the court should not sit until we were able to settle the matter with the District Officer…We also insisted that prices of produce such as palm oil and ground nuts were to be settled at once. While we were talking about prices of produce some of the women also said that chiefs should not go into the court until these prices had been settled.” The subsequent testimony of Nwamuo, Enyeremaka, and other women made it clear that by attacking specific sites they intended to disrupt the operations of the colonial administration and the instruments of their socioeconomic marginalization. The desire to halt “business as usual” and force the British to re-evaluate their business practices and economic policies, so markedly unfair to women, also motivated the actions taken against European-owned stores and “factories.” Just as the women only harmed the compounds of men against whom they had some cause for complaint, the crowds at the major trading hub of Aba and elsewhere looted European stores but left local stores untouched. Each of their targets represented a physical instantiation of the more general colonial enclosure faced by southeastern Nigerian women.

For the participants in the Ogu, these measures were a direct response to the perverse value system underlying their oppression, particularly the British valuation of private property—a concept not easily assimilated into Igbo and other southeastern Nigerian worldviews—even above the lives of local women and, thus, the good of land. The British reaction to their demonstrations, especially after the events at Aba, seemed to confirm the women’s reading of colonial priorities. When a large group of Ngwa women on the Aba- Owerrinta road from Aba to Eke Akpata refused to move aside and allow his car to pass, the medical officer for Aba, Dr. William Hunter, sped through the crowd, striking and seriously injuring at least two women. Ironically, the doctor claimed to have acted out of fear for his passenger, a European nurse who went unnamed in all the records treating the Women’s War. As the Oloko women had done in first approaching Captain Hill’s wife and others would attempt to do later at Opobo, the warring women probably sought nothing more from this encounter than counsel with a fellow woman. Moreover, the crowd’s refusal to part and let the doctor’s automobile pass represented the women’s demonstration practice of occupying the new roads that had supplanted the older pathways traditionally under their care. Southeastern Nigerian women, as previously noted, targeted roads and railways erected by the colonial government during the Women’s War of 1929, as they had in the earlier Nwaobiala of 1925. Dr. Hunter’s testimony shows that even in this fraught moment, most of the women took out their anger on his car rather than his person. Some English-speaking women attempted to convince him to come and care for the
women who had been run over, which he testified he was willing to do. When the same women demanded that the nursing sister who accompanied him also take part in this medical examination, however, he refused, believing that “it was obvious that they wanted the two of us to go so they could do us in.”

While some members of the crowd pursued the doctor and his female passenger to the factory of the Niger Company where they took shelter, most moved on to Aba. As news of the incident spread, women besieged administrative buildings and looted European businesses there, including the Niger Company factory. To this point, the southeastern Nigerian women who participated in the Ogu had confined their actions to harassing warrant chiefs, court clerks, and British officials—all of whom were associated with the government—and assailing native court buildings in various locales. For instance, when Nwata, the warrant chief of Owerrinta, tried to escape a crowd of thousands of women by riding his bicycle through them, carrying a shotgun, and wearing his cap of office, they seized all of these objects, tore his clothes, and chased him into the bush. It was only after the incident at Aba, when women had been assaulted and killed by one of the “motors” that “bring death,” that women at Imo River, Umoba, Mbawsi, Okopedi, and Utu Etim Ekpo absconded with goods from the European shops and trading factories, while at other places like Umuahia and Opobo, where there were a significant number of factories, they made no attempt to loot them.

Colonial officials and police along with a group of European businessmen, African male clerks, and even a few indigenous boy scouts drove the women from Aba using axe and pick handles from the European trading factories, all in the name of defending property. However, British colonial and military officers dealt more harshly with subsequent demonstrations, firing on large groups of unarmed women in three separate instances in the days that followed. On December 15, a group of women burned the native court and began “looting” the local “factory” and the houses of clerks at Utu Etim Ekpo. They most likely broke into the clerks’ homes assuming that they held currency collected as taxes. As women had done earlier in other areas, they assembled en masse and demanded the opportunity to state their grievances to the district officer. Instead of the latter coming to speak to the women in good faith, “police and troops were sent” to disperse them. Angered by the move, the warring women shouted at the armed men as they approached. Although the women had never been involved in violence against other human beings, the British military officer ordered his troops to fire into the crowd and did so again later the same day. Eighteen women died and at least as many were wounded as a result of the shootings.

That night, as word of the women’s death circulated through the market and associational networks, another large group of women converged on Opobo, a riverine trading center and site of intermixing between market women from a number of linguistic groups. This group destroyed the native court building, post office, and local dispensary at Opobo Native Town on Opobo Island, then danced, sang, and, no doubt, discussed the latest reports from surrounding areas throughout the night in the marketplace. Earlier that day, likely before news of the shootings at Utu Etim Ekpo had reached them, representatives of the women met with the local district officer, Arthur Whitman, who agreed to see them the following morning to address their concerns. On the morning of December 16, hundreds of women streamed into the administrative center on Opobo mainland for the meeting with Whitman at the Rest House. Women from the different towns represented—including the predominately Ibibio- and Efik-speaking communities of Opobo Native Town, Bonny, Andoni, Kwa, Ogoniby and Nkoro—presented a series of grievances to the district officer and asked that he give them copies of a written statement to the effect that women would not be taxed and that they were also unhappy about the taxation of men. Here again, the women adopted the procedures associated with the colonial government, even though most in attendance would have been unable to read English, and underscored the broad basis of their demonstration in their insistence that the representative of each community receive a copy.

As new arrivals joined the ranks of the growing crowd with the previous day’s deaths on their minds,
the women chanted, “What is the smell? Death is the smell.” Some wore palm fronds bound around their foreheads or waists, while others carried fronds or small sticks from their gardens—all of which were suggestive of the recriminations against the abuse of the land. However, the most militant of the women warriors, often the most elderly of participants, arrived in a state of oto (nakedness/nudity), in direct contradiction to senior women’s ordinary practice, as an extreme form of public shaming. These women taunted the British colonial and military officers on hand and their Hausa troops by asking them if they would like to look at their mothers’ genitals, a profound insult among southeastern Nigerian women to the present day. Disrobing as a group in this manner represented a powerful expression of women’s rage, especially when combined with the sanction of genital cursing. There are several stages of genital cursing for Igbo women, ranging from a verbal suggestion like, “Do you want to see where you came from?,” to an expressive movement like untying the waist cloth in a public and ceremonious gesture, to the actual removal of lower garments and display of the genitals. The report of the Birrell Gray Commission subsequently noted, “One beldame [at Opobo] tore off her loin cloth and told Lieut. Hill in English that he was the ‘son of a pig.’”?63

We do not know exactly what the women sang as they “sat on” the various local chiefs or danced in protest against colonial authority. Some hints emerge from various sources from which we can piece together a plausible case that the songs were of such a nature as to cause British men and women to blush. Margaret Green, a trained anthropologist who undertook studies of Igbo women in the immediate aftermath of the Women’s War but issued her findings much later, recounted the lyrics of the songs the women sang as they danced and “sat on” miscreants in a particular village. “I am seeking someone to have sexual connection with me,” went the chorus of one song. “Women who will not come out into this place, let millipede go into her sex organs, let earthworm go into her sex organs,” ran another designed to “induce women…to turn out in force.” Another song contained lyrics about “sex organs being bright…during connection, and there was one in which the name of the woman to be fined was mentioned:…N.O., sex organ is good to hold in hand like flute. Only there is no place one is holding it with hand.”64 These were songs women sang to each other, we must note, but later sources suggest what might have been sung and done to men. T. Obinkaram Echewa’s 1992 fictional account of the Women’s War, I Saw the Sky Catch Fire, includes a scene in which the protagonist’s grandmother participates in a singing and dancing action against a man who has beaten his wife. “Ozurumba, Ozurumba,” the women chanted, “you like to beat your wife! /You will beat all of us tonight,/Until your arms fall off!/Ozurumba, Ozurumba, you have the biggest prick in town/You will fuck all of us tonight,/Until your prick falls off!” When Ozurumba tried to flee, the women

jerked off his loin cloth so that he was completely naked. A roar of laughter and applause arose from the women as the strip of loin cloth passed as trophy among the women…. The women pushed Ozurumba to the ground and spread him out, face up, holding his hands and legs so he could not struggle free. Then they took turns sitting on him, pulling up their cloths and kirtles to their bare buttocks and planting their nakedness on every exposed element of his body.65

Later accounts of the lives of Igbo women, produced by a number of official and semi-official agents of the British government, referred, sometimes only obliquely, to the sexual components of the actions of the protesters that had so unnerved British officials. Margery Perham, that respected Africa hand, described the women’s actions as “embarrassing.” Others called them “rude.” Sylvia Leith-Ross wrote a lengthy ethnographic work after spending two years with Igbo women in a variety of settings. She described the women of Nguru, whom she had earlier indicated had played a leading role in the demonstrations, as having “morals…more lax than, say, in Nneato…I certainly heard more stories of desertions and unfaithfulness in Nguru than anywhere else.” Her analysis of Nigerian women’s dancing suggests the perspective through which Britons observed such activity. “Why is it that all African dances have so often been declared to be wicked and obscene? Is it because they are looked upon as being essentially sexual in
“tone and therefore demoralizing?” she asked rhetorically. Green, the only trained anthropologist among the British female observers, had a less subtle understanding of women’s dance, one more in keeping with the mythic, monstrous, fantastic visions of “fierce Amazons” in the “matriarchies of West Africa” that informed popular imagination and that of the Britons involved in the Women’s War. “I saw a woman dart across the yard to join the dancers in a succession of wild leaps, her arms outstretched and the long, hanging breasts that so many of these women have adding to the grotesque effect. …there was a menace in their dancing that must have been highly unpleasant for the object of it. They pranced aggressively, sometimes holding their buttocks with their hands, sometimes sticking them out and shaking them; or they advanced making sexually suggestive gestures, and the quality of their laughter again conveyed their feeling of obscenity.” She called the night in question when this “sitting on” ritual took place, an “orgy.”

To southeastern Nigerian women, the mass display or suggested display of older women’s genitals signified a gesture of contempt that implied abominable incest, as it concerned elder women’s role as mothers of the land. It was also an allusion to the perceived transformation of the land under colonialism. Women displayed their willingness to give up their personal status and identity and become part of a mass female movement to depict in a graphic manner the wrath of the earth goddess herself, using as their weapons the bodily organs associated with birth and the mysterious creativity of female sexuality. Such communal oto became an extreme instance of social nudity during the Women’s War, turning the women into exemplars of what we might call the feminine principle and moving them beyond the norms of complementarity between the sexes and into a frighteningly solidified gender position intended to transgress and transform the cosmos. In this instance and elsewhere, the use of older women’s oto represented both a sign and a practice, a curse and a weapon. It was a snapshot of abomination, of what the world looked like when turned upside down.

Whereas southeastern Nigerian men generally understood the severity of this rebuke and moved out of the women’s way, British colonial and military officers interpreted nakedness in this context differently. Officials certainly did perceive the women’s behavior as the sign of a world turned upside down (as the demonstrators intended) but in terms markedly different from those that animated the latter. As we discuss in Chapter 7, they viewed these actions as proof that the women gathered at Consular Beach in Opobo were “frenzied,” utterly “savage,” and, by and large, prostitutes. For them, the demonstrations, which included singing, dancing, and sometimes destroying property, were bad enough, but the fact that many of the marchers wore little, if anything, was horrifying. Accordingly, they responded in a manner that exposed a fundamental misrecognition of the Ogu’s meaning. While the women at Opobo awaited copies of the statement from Whitman, some began to push on the fence separating them from the district officer and their “papers.” Unnerved by this and the nature of the demonstration in general, the British military officer on the scene, Captain Richard Hill, discharged his pistol into the women at the front of the crowd and ordered his troops to fire. Over thirty women, including the wife of the local warrant chief, were killed in the shooting spree. Like at Utu Etim Ekpo the previous day, the women’s worst fears about their physical danger were realized, just as they had earlier feared in light of Okugo’s attack.

Conclusion

Both the participants of the Women’s War and the British officials who moved to suppress the women’s movement brought a number of preconceptions regarding the others’ values, beliefs, and actions to these encounters. The targets chosen by southeastern Nigerian women for their abuse revealed a sophisticated understanding of how colonial rule changed the social landscape and threatened their lives and livelihoods. Although the spread of the Ogu coincided with a gradual escalation of tactics, the women focused their attacks on the symbolic trappings of British imperial power and the instruments of their
exploitation at the hands of local men. Comparing themselves to the “vultures of the marketplace” in their testimony before the Aba Commission, several women later expressed great surprise that anyone would want to harm them. Vultures performed the indispensable task of clearing the marketplace of refuse and abomination at the end of each trading day; they were regarded as sacred for living up to their responsibilities to the marketplace, its people, and its deity. For their part, colonial officials subsequently viewed the handling of the initial egwu at Oloko as a significant misstep, an example of how forbearance and leniency only encouraged savagery. Just as British officials failed to appreciate the severity of the concerns that inspired the Nwaobiala dancers in 1925, they similarly underestimated the depth of frustration and despair underlying the Women’s War of late 1929, leading them to misconstrue the participants’ motives and intentions with tragic consequences. In Chapter 6 and 7, we look more deeply into the British reaction to the Women’s War, analyzing how the culture of British imperial rule, as well as the characters and historical experience of individual colonial officials, played integral parts in the tragedy that unfolded in December of 1929.

“1923” [Massing of troops and band]. Igbo peoples, Nigeria.

“Roadside Market” Igbo peoples, Nigeria.
Following the counting incident in Oloko on November 25 and the initial rising of local women there, the situation appeared to colonial officials to have returned to relative calm. Captain Hill left Oloko on November 29, feeling confident that he had resolved the problem. Quite to the contrary, however, the confrontation at Oloko only confirmed the women’s suspicions regarding the intentions of British officials and their African male representatives. Thousands of predominantly Igbo and Ibibio women spread the Ogu throughout much of southern Nigeria in the weeks that followed, including large portions of Owerri and the Bende division of Calabar province, much to the dismay and horror of colonial officials. What most of the British took initially for a minor incident quickly became a threat beyond administrators’ means to control or even comprehend. They would continue to misinterpret the women’s movement as a series of anti-taxation riots.

As the resident for Calabar province, Edward Falk, wrote to his wife, “Trouble is now spreading to Essene and Ikparakwa Court areas. It is stupid because Essene has been assessed and the demand for next year’s tax is unchanged in 20 towns out of 24. In two it was reduced.” Helen Falk recorded a similar understanding of the cause of the disturbances in her journal. “The natives strongly object to the Assessment Officer coming into their villages and compounds, to find out how many taxable male inhabitants there really are. It has been guesswork so far, as there has been no census…. “The natives,” she declared, “know perfectly well, that they have been rather under-assessed if anything, and they are afraid that they will be made to pay more than they have paid so far. This is not the case. The new assessment is required to fix a lump sum for each village or tribe, which one chief has to collect and for which he gets 10% commission.” Nevertheless, she continued, “It is very difficult to make the ordinary bushnative understand this. All he knows is that two years ago the officer came round and made certain enquiries, and afterwards he had to pay tax to the Government.” She noted that her husband “was very much against upsetting the country again so soon,” and instead had “suggested that it would be wiser to wait until the people saw that they got something for their money…. Roads used to be made by forced labour, which was very unpopular. That should now cease, and this part of the tax scheme was popular. But the people had hardly seen it work properly yet, in so short a time, to make the tax popular.”

Tellingly, not only did the Falks fail to acknowledge that it was exclusively women who initiated the “trouble,” but they had, at best, only a partial understanding of the complex roots of the latter’s anger. We have already seen that the women’s grievances extended well beyond the rumored tax on women. As one woman explained, “Our grievances are that the land changed. We are dying. It is a long time since the Chiefs and the people who know book… have been oppressing us… The new Chiefs are also receiving bribes. Since the white men came, our [palm] oil does not fetch money. Our [palm] kernels do not fetch money. If we take goats or yams to market to sell, court messengers who wear a uniform take all these things from us.” The Women’s War jumped administrative, linguistic, and ethnic boundaries during the
first half of December. As a consequence, fears arose among the European population regarding their tenuous position in what Falk described as “after all a conquered country,” and the counter-measures employed to suppress the movement became markedly more violent. On three separate occasions, colonial and military officers ordered the troops and police under their command to fire on women demonstrators or did so themselves with murderous results. During the anxious days of mid-December, hesitancy to use force against crowds of women came to be seen as folly—potentially fatal folly—and in hindsight, administrators like Falk judged this to be a major (if understandable) failing of their colleagues in neighboring Owerri province in response to the first manifestations of the movement there.

The Invention of the “Aba Riots”

As the women’s movement threatened to spill over into Calabar province in early December, European administrators, merchants, and their spouses grew increasingly tense over the prospect of new “outbreaks,” which, they feared, could materialize virtually anywhere without warning and dissolve just as rapidly, leaving destruction in their wake. Helen Falk described the dread and terror that gripped the European women cloistered in Port Harcourt, the provincial center of Calabar. By December 13, the troops and most of the police force stationed there had left for areas bordering the Aba district, leaving Calabar virtually undefended. Spotty reports of happenings elsewhere and, at best, intermittent correspondence with their husbands at the “front” exacerbated the situation. After large crowds of Nigerian women occupied the important trading center of Aba on December 14, one woman who had been there at the time brought news. “All the European women in the station,” Helen learned, “were rushed into Port Harcourt. Some of them had quite nasty experiences, two of them were quite hysterical and are going home” on the recently docked Abinsi. On December 16, the wife of the assistant district officer at Eket, Mrs. Knight, arrived in Calabar “unexpectedly,” having been ordered there by Helen’s husband, Edward. “The poor thing arrived here,” Helen observed in her journal, “looking quite nervous and forlorn.” As new arrivals converged on Calabar, several of women stayed at the Falks’ residence. Helen noted that “Commander Maxwell-Johnson suggested that I should stick a board on the house ‘Only for Refugees;’” she proposed it be named the “Shelter for Stranded Women.” At the same time, the remaining officials readied themselves for an onslaught on Port Harcourt, though this never materialized. “All is quiet here,” Helen wrote, “but preparations are being made to meet the eventuality of trouble. European Special Constables were sworn in yesterday, there are pickets by the water tanks, and the prison has been provisioned because all the Europeans are going in there as soon as there is any sign of trouble.” The police commissioner instructed the women “to have a campbed and a packed suitcase ready to be able to leave at a moment’s notice.” By December 17, Helen estimated that thirty European women had retreated to Port Harcourt, and the anxious atmosphere began to take its toll. “Poor little Mrs. Knight quite collapsed tonight, she could not stand the strain any longer.” “If we actually have to go into the prison,” Helen continued, “I expect we shall have several women whose nerves will not stand the strain. There is another girl, the wife of a trader’s assistant… , who is already quite hysterical. I don’t blame them, it is really quite alarming, especially for those who have not got their husbands here.” As the nerves of some began to fray, Helen wrote that “we all try to be cheerful and make plenty of jokes to keep our spirits up, otherwise it would be dreadful and unbearable. The feeling of uncertainty is so hard to bear.”

Although their experiences during the Women’s War differed substantially from those of European women like Helen Falk, colonial officials also endured anxious hours of waiting throughout the days of early to mid-December. Since telegraph wires, railway lines, roads, and bridges were common targets of the women warriors’ actions and were regularly damaged again as soon as they were repaired, transportation and communication became infuriatingly difficult. Physical exhaustion brought on by incessant traveling from one trouble spot to another, thin numbers on the ground, and many sleepless
baffled and infuriated the British authorities on the ground. Or after visits by colonial officers, or, in some cases, not at all, the participants of the Women’s War particular farms are looted and houses in their villages burnt. Insurgents have not got a hope of shaking us off but they are very stupid and won’t give in unless their residents have avoided this potential crisis, “desperate cries for assistance” arrived from Opobo and Itu. When troop re-enforcements from Aba reached Uyo later that night, Falk immediately sent them off again “into the darkness,” as he explained, “leaving us with a few police and soldiers.” Similarly, District Officer Whitman recalled that in one instance his accompaniment of 12 police had “only 10 rounds of ammunition between them.” As these accounts suggest, anticipation and fears of impending trouble and a sense of being left exposed and vulnerable characterized colonial officials’ experiences during the Ogu more often than direct confrontation.

When they did find themselves face-to-face with large crowds of Nigerian women, the nature of opposition presented by the Ohandum, which Falk termed “passive resistance,” frustrated them further. As he wrote to his wife, “The people won’t stand and fight, but there is much passive resistance and perhaps some fear which prevents the people coming in to see me to ask for terms of peace… . The insurgents have not got a hope of shaking us off but they are very stupid and won’t give in unless their particular farms are looted and houses in their villages burnt.” Appearing without warning, just before or after visits by colonial officers, or, in some cases, not at all, the participants of the Women’s War baffled and infuriated the British authorities on the ground.

By December 9, British officials again faced large crowds of women demonstrators. What C. T.
Lawrence, the colonial secretary for the Southern Provinces, later called “the main outbreak” of the Women’s War began with mass demonstrations at Okpala and Owerrinta. “The hordes of women at these places” refused to speak and, “though orderly at first,” reportedly threw sticks and stones at passing cars and lorries. The women at Owerrinta “congregated from Okpala, Nguru, Ayaba and Oloko areas,” occupied the native court, “demanded their caps from the chiefs, assaulted them and chased them into the bush.” From there, “probably because of the psychology of a crowd is often influenced by that of its lowest component,” according to the Aba Commission’s report, “some of the women followed the clerk to his house, forced the windows and took some cash in a cigarette tin and a few books.” The report also noted that the women assembled at Owerrinta exclaimed, “We have got to pay higher prices for what we buy, but we cannot get any money as the price of palm oil is going down,” and they insisted that “they were ‘Ohandum,’ that is to say ‘women of all towns.’” Pastor Inyama recalled that “he met the women parading the street and singing the mournful dirge: ‘We are dying, our hearts are not good, for Death is standing before us.’” The women at Owerrinta and elsewhere went to great lengths to demonstrate that they acted collectively. They mobilized under the banner of Ohandum, the grand collective of mature women or useful mothers of the land, and identified an array of threats to their shared interests, their existence, and by extension that of the community as a whole. As the British had never previously dealt with southeastern women in their collective (and illusive) form, it is perhaps unsurprising that colonial officials found themselves at a loss to know exactly how to react to this new threat.

The following day, December 10, the district officer for Aba, John Jackson, met with a crowd of three or four thousand women at Owerrinta and attempted to assuage their concerns. He learned that they included representatives of the women of Okpala, Ngor, and Nguru in Owerri as well as Oloko in Bende. Jackson subsequently maintained that his efforts had been “in vain owing to the incessant shouting and the singing by the crowd of two chants which ran as follows: ‘If it were not for the white man we should kill Chief Okugo’ and ‘If it were not for the white man we should kill all the Chiefs.’” Jackson told the Aba Commission, “The leaders who appeared to be women of some character, made repeated efforts to gain silence for me to address the meeting,” and, “at one time I felt that their efforts would meet with success, when into the compound poured hundreds arrayed in palm leaves, and dressed in very scanty clothing.”

When the meeting ended, some of the women informed Jackson that they would see him at Aba. Around 11:00 pm that same evening, a group of women gathered outside of and threw stones at the house of Mr. Toovey, the station magistrate in Aba—a symbol and indeed agent of women’s declining economic and social power—until they were “repulsed by revolver fire.” On December 11, with large numbers of women converging on the town from surrounding areas, the resident, Mr. Ingles, arrived in Aba from Port Harcourt, and “shortly afterwards general rioting of a most serious nature broke out.” In his testimony before the Aba Commission, Mr. Atkinson stated that beginning in the early morning hours “an increasing number of women were passing to and fro along the main road going to Owerrinta.” “They were certainly more disorderly than they were on the 10th,” he asserted, “and they were wearing crowns on their heads and green leaves round their waists,” as “they were all very scantily attired.” Mr. Logius of the European firm Messrs. G. B. Ollivant testified that he encountered a crowd of women who “mishandled” him on his way to work.

As a further indication of the women’s disorderly demeanor, Lawrence noted that, “even Government bungalows were attacked and European ladies besieged inside and pelted with sticks and stones.” As they had done previously, the women targeted the instruments of their expropriation—local government buildings and dispensaries—for their abuse, but, on the basis of the eyewitness accounts of British officials and businessmen, Lawrence also claimed that the demonstrators posed an imminent danger to the “European ladies” in Owerrinta. As will be discussed further below, this is highly unlikely, an assumption that revealed the degree to which British colonial officials misunderstood the women’s
movement. While they likely sought out the European women on hand, they did so to appeal for the latter to intervene or act as intermediaries, as they had done at Bende with Captain Hill’s wife, precisely because they were also women.

If the level of disorderliness was rising, colonial officials’ fears that the disturbances would spread beyond Owerri province also seemed to be confirmed by the events of December 12. Again a crowd of women demanded the chiefs’ caps of office—this time at Azumini—and when rebuffed burnt the native court and other official buildings. “The burning on December 12th of Azumini native court, which is situated near the Owerri-Calabar provincial boundary,” Lawrence observed subsequently, “was an indication that the flame of revolt would possibly spread to the Calabar Province. The Court was burnt by Ibos and Anangs, the latter being one of the tribes living in parts of the Abak and Ikot Ekpene Divisions of the Calabar Province.”

Azumini was an important government town on the border between Igbo and Ibibio territory, and the events at Azumini troubled colonial officials all the more because Jackson had visited the area only days before as a preemptive action to allay concerns that women would be taxed. Like earlier incidents during the Ogu, the colonial officials on hand in Azumini failed to recognize any sign of discord amongst the local population in the preceding days; they were shocked by how quickly the women’s movement materialized and the severity of what appeared to them as an abrupt onslaught upon the colonial order.

Not only did the demonstrators converge suddenly by means of an occult method of communication and without being detected by colonial officials or their local male collaborators, but worse still the movement now seemed to transcend the linguistic divide between Igbo and Ibibio and the (wholly artificial) administrative division between Owerri and Calabar, exacerbating fears that “the flame of revolt” was spreading uncontrollably. (No Igbo or Ibibio woman would have recognized the slicing up of the landscape undertaken by British colonizers, which proved to be irrelevant to the women’s movements across space. However, an important part of the colonizing process involved reorienting people in space and time towards the colonial centers.) As a result, the British response to the destruction at Azumini entailed a remarkable display of violence.

Jackson imposed a level of “collective punishment” consisting of mass fines and the burning of entire villages that even the Aba Commission later conceded was excessive. Moreover, the actions of colonial troops under Jackson’s command produced the only case in which charges of sexual abuse were raised during the various government inquiries into the Ogu Umunwaanyi. In her testimony before the Aba Commission, Rosanah Ogwe decried Jackson’s mistreatment of the local population in Azumini, noting that “some women were met on the road by soldiers and stripped naked.” Women shed their usual fine or serviceable attire during the Women’s War, employed oto (nakedness), and donned young palm fronds as a statement of power, a symbol of “adverse sanctions of the earth,” and a threat. When others, especially men from outside of the community, stripped women against their will, it signaled a loss of female power and a threat to those who were forcibly disrobed. Asked if she had knowledge of anything more serious than this, Ogwe added, “what was more serious which I have not mentioned is that some of the women were held on the road and ravished. A lot of women who were ill-treated in this way were all ashamed to come forward and make a statement as to the treatment they actually received.” Later pressed by the commissioners regarding the veracity of this claim, she insisted, “I was an eye-witness of the incident of ravishing. It took place on the main road and the victim cried out. A lot of women went there and I was amongst the people who went to the scene.” “Right in the middle of the road?” the crown counsel inquired. “Yes.” He then asked, “How many soldiers?” “It may have been three or four soldiers cohabiting with one woman.” Although the commissioners never inquired directly as to Jackson’s role in these incidents or his exact location at the time that they occurred, Ogwe affirmed that she “could get no satisfaction” from him when she approached him regarding the outrage.

The soldiers in question most likely would have been Hausa, African men from northern Nigeria, but
Jackson and several other colonial officers, who remained unnamed in the testimony, were on hand or at least in close proximity when the sexual assault(s) took place. Jackson denied the accusations before the Aba Commission, which in any case hardly seemed interested in pursuing the issue beyond the confiscation and destruction of property as part of the collective punishment exacted by Jackson. In determining if the response of British officials fit the nature of the threat, the commissioners focused predominately on whether and to what extent they had violated the sanctity of private property.

Owing to the events of the previous day at Azumini and reports that the women’s movement was continuing to spread into new areas, the colonial government made Owerri a “proclaimed” district on December 13, then did the same for Calabar province the next day. This failed to halt the spread of the Ogu into Calabar, however, as women burnt the native court building and reportedly looted the trading factory at Utu Etim Ekpo. Later the same day, a large crowd of women marched on the government station at Abak, where police fired on the women, wounding several. Once again, the incident surprised the local district officer, who had visited the area only the previous day. As he later stated, “Everything was reported quiet although there were rumours at Ika and Utu Etim Ekpo that these Courts were threatened… Everything appeared normal in the District, markets crowded and people moving freely about the roads, and I reported to the Resident that I did not fear any immediate developments.”

On December 15, the lieutenant governor for the Southern Provinces declared martial law in all of the proclaimed areas. That afternoon, troops called in to “restore order” intercepted two large crowds of women on their way to Utu Etim Ekpo and fired on them, causing numerous casualties. Meanwhile, crowds of singing and dancing women marched on Ikot Ekpena and Itu. By this time, as the report of the Birrell Gray Commission put it, “all the western portion of the Calabar Province between Itu and northern Opobo was stated to be infected” with the Ogu. In the evening, demonstrators destroyed the “native town” dispensary and native court, and then “assaulted” the unpopular Chief Mark Pebble Jaja and “other chiefs” who tried to restrain them. On December 16, the ferocity of the British response to the Ogu Umunwaanyi reached its tragic zenith as the same military force involved in the shooting outside Utu Etim Ekpo fired into a crowd of roughly 1,000 demonstrators on Egwanga Beach at Opobo, killing scores of women and one male bystander. As the movement continued to spread, colonial officials’ misrecognition of the women’s intentions and actions led to an escalating level of violence, especially after the events at Aba.

The nature of the British response to the Women’s War changed dramatically on December 14. Up to that point, women demonstrators had gone unchecked, had forced colonial officials to address their grievances, or had been dispersed by police without loss of life. Colonial violence had been limited largely to collective punishment in response to the women’s actions. For British officials, however, the situation became more dire on December 13, when women at Aba in eastern Owerri province, one of the largest trading centers of southern Nigeria, destroyed government buildings, besieged, and in some instances, looted European trading factories—an incident that would come to define the Ogu as a whole in the eyes of the British. Henceforth, the Women’s War would be known to the British as the “Aba Riots.” The members of Ohandum who testified before the Aba Commission insisted that the demonstrators only became violent after the incident discussed above in which a local medical officer struck two women with his car as he drove through a crowd on the way to Aba. The automobile incident and apparent disregard for their lives infuriated the women. They regarded it as all the more sinister since, as we have seen already, many of them held that “the Motors bring death,” and the European female passenger had left her fellow women in distress. Some followed the doctor’s car to his house, where they danced and sang denunciations, but most made their way to Aba and spread news of the incident.

Both the Colonial Office and the Aba Commission considered the doctor’s actions to be justified because his passenger was a European woman, a nurse who they believed would have been subjected to
unspeakable horrors if yielded to the mob. The colonial administrators and representatives of European firms in Aba also refused to accept that the doctor’s actions had sparked the women’s response. The testimony of John Jackson, the district officer for Aba, was representative in this regard. When asked to what extent the incident contributed to the “disturbance,” he insisted, “Not one iota, sir. It was made an excuse when the women found they were checked and could not pursue their campaign of looting and destruction, and they hit on the first thing that they could think of as to why they were annoyed.” Like the limited press coverage of the incidents in Britain and Lagos, Jackson depicted the demonstrators as looters intent on theft and destruction from the start and dismissed their complaints as excuses and prevarications. “I do not think that they believed [that taxation of women was imminent] for one moment,” he told the Aba Commission. “The leaders, at least, did not. The less intelligent did not give it two thoughts. They got excited and would hardly be responsible for their actions. They reverted to a primitive state…they became completely savage.” The British colonial officials characterized the women simultaneously as calculating thieves and “completely savage” primitives who “would hardly be responsible for their actions.” They often tried to reconcile this contradiction by distinguishing between a few “ringleaders” among the women or male instigators who were too cowardly to commit these acts themselves and the “frenzied” and “less intelligent” mass of women who “did not give [their actions] two thoughts”.

A motley assemblage of police, colonial officers, European businessmen, some of their African male employees, and even a few native boy scouts ultimately dispersed the women who converged on Aba using axe and pick handles from the European trading factories. This makeshift force included a variety of African men who were outfitted with imported goods from European businesses alongside British representatives of the colonial administration. Although administrators managed to clear the town without firing on the women or incurring further loss of life, several of the women sustained injuries from blows administered by African men during the fracas. Part of the damage done to the women warriors went beyond the physical blows they received, however: the events at Aba demonstrated once again to the women on hand the degree to which local men had become complicit in the nefarious forces and violence directed against them.

The road from Aba: Abak and Utu Etim Ekpo

Despite having quelled the disturbance at the important trading center, the incident frightened colonial officials into requesting the assistance of armed troops in suppressing the women’s movement, which spread rapidly from Aba in Owerri province into predominantly Ibibio areas of Calabar province, especially Abak, Utu Etim Ekpo, Ikot Ekpene, and Opobo. Around 3:30 pm on December 14, a crowd of four or five hundred women approached the Abak government station, where a police detachment led by the police commissioner, Captain Ford, and the district officers of Uyo and Abak, Mylius and James, met them. When the women in front crossed a line that James had drawn in the sand of the open market space, the three men charged, firing their pistols into the ground before them. Though it is impossible to determine the exact number of casualties because many of the wounded were too frightened to come forward for medical treatment after the incident, their actions resulted in the deaths of at least two or three women. In what the women must have perceived as a highly symbolic and significant gesture, the police cleared them from the marketplace using their rifle butts once the shots halted the crowd’s advance. Lieutenant Browning’s platoon of troops from the Third Battalion of the Nigeria Regiment then followed the women for several miles outside Abak before heading to Utu Etim Ekpo to camp for the night.

The next day, Captain James and Lieutenant Browning’s platoon intercepted two separate groups of women on their way to Utu Etim Ekpo. As the procession of women—scantly clad, singing derisive songs, dancing excitedly, and making bawdy gestures, as described in Chapter 5—approached the
officers, James and Browning saw in them an image of extreme disorder and a profound threat to their lives as well as to the continued existence of British rule in the region. Although protocol called for him to read the Riot Act before employing firearms, James told the Birrell Gray Commission that he “considered it futile to try to use words in order to disperse the mob judging by the attitude of the women in their advance and their frenzied demeanor.” The women’s appearance and behavior, bewildered the officers. According to Browning, “their heads and bodies were decked out with grass leaves; they were carrying large staves and were shouting and were quite demented.” Similarly, James explained, “I have been nine years in the province and never saw anything like this before. I never saw women dressed in this manner before. I never saw them going about armed...There were no children with them.” If not checked, he insisted, they would not only have overrun his detachment of twenty-six soldiers, but also would have brought about widespread insurrection and the dissolution of the colonial political order. As he put it, “I feared that if the troops got involved in a hand to hand struggle with these mad women it was possible that some sort of reverse would have been sustained and the whole country would have been up.”

Stripped of their usual clothing and the markers distinguishing their marital and maternal roles, the women became exemplars of revolt. Yet in the context of the women’s actions throughout the movement, this was a dubious appraisal of the stakes of the situation.

While the violence that accompanied the consolidation of British rule in southeastern Nigeria in the early twentieth century had provoked significant resistance, the combined effects of collective punishments, forced labor, scarcity of goods, hardships during the war years, and the influenza pandemic had brought that overt resistance to an end by the early 1920s, largely completing the process of “pacification.” Fears of a general insurrection in 1929 or, as Jackson put it, a “universal and frenzied rising” including both men and women, were unfounded on the evidence then available to colonial officials and ignored the existence of the wide array of African male intermediaries, from missionaries and court messengers to warrant chiefs, whom the women of the Ogu targeted as often as they did the British representatives of the colonial administration.

The officers’ readings of the women’s appearance, behavior, and demeanor, along with their limited knowledge of recent events at Aba, Abak, and elsewhere appear to have formed the basis of their actions. When James and Browning confronted the crowds of women as they approached Utu Etim Ekpo, they did not attempt to communicate with the women before firing on them. In his testimony before the Birrell Gray Commission, Browning described the two shootings at Utu Etim Ekpo, which killed at least eighteen women and wounded nineteen others.

I ordered my leading section of six men to fire two rounds rapid and they did so. One or two figures were seen to drop but the remainder took no notice whatever and continued to advance. Meantime I had signalled [sic] up my Lewis gun...[and] gave the order to the Lewis gun to fire. The first burst went over the heads of the crowd; that was not intentional...as the men had been ordered to fire at the crowd. The third burst found the mark and I at once ordered to stop fire. The crowd also stopped. The first two bursts had no effect. The crowd continued shouting, waving their arms and sticks and then they slowly withdrew. The distance was stepped out later and the distance where they were stopped was sixty yards from us. When I stopped two or three more casualties had been caused by the Lewis gun; that was what stopped them. The platoon then advanced and began burning down the house of the chief under the orders of the District officer. While we were doing this we heard the noise of another crowd coming towards us and we advanced to meet it. I had my Lewis gun section in front. They were also decked out in green leaves and were waving sticks. They had the same hostile attitude as the other mob. I brought the Lewis gun section into action and gave the order to fire. It fired one burst of seven rounds which caused casualties and stopped the crowd; a few people dropped. There were two dead. They withdrew but still kept shouting. We advanced and then told them to disperse.

Consular Beach, Opobo

The day after the shootings outside of Utu Etim Ekpo, scores of women were killed and many more wounded in the massacre at Consular Beach in Egwanga, Opobo-mainland, the bloodiest incident in the
British suppression of the *Ogu*. Like Aba, the Opobo Township at Consular Beach had become an important site for the colonial administration as well as for European trading firms. Consular Beach was advantageous to both government administration and trade—housing not only the district office, post office, treasury, customs houses and government bank, but also European businesses like G. B. Ollivant and the Royal Niger Company—because the Opobo river was deep enough there to anchor large cargo and military vessels. Yet long before the arrival of a significant British presence at Opobo, it had served as the hub of a brisk riverine trade where Igbo and Ibibio women from surrounding areas converged to ply their wares in the marketplace. Thus women’s trade (*afia*) had been increasingly displaced from this area—literally marginalized in spatial terms—by the development of the colonial and mercantile infrastructure.

A dense forest of mangrove trees lay across the river from Consular Beach, and several villages inhabited by the predominately Ibibio local population bordered the township on the other side. On the official colonial government map of the area, the dense bush across the river to the west and the native towns to the east appeared as part of the same dark abyss, both represented indiscriminately in the same shade of brown. The “European Reservation,” by contrast, was colored pink, and to prevent unwanted mixing between the African and European populations a buffer zone, called the “Non-Residential Zone” and colored green on the map, surrounded this area. A largely symbolic, light bamboo fence divided the “European Reservation,” which included European trading firms, government offices, and European residences, from the world outside of it. The Opobo River to the east and the “Non-Residential Zone” of mostly mangroves and shrubs reinforced this division. The British colonial administration inscribed racial difference onto the physical arrangement of space in colonial Nigeria, and this racialized understanding of the landscape left the British officials on the scene at Consular Beach on December 16 all the more susceptible to the feeling of being surrounded and trapped, no matter what the women’s actions might have been.\(^2^6\)

On the evening of December 15, a crowd of women attacked the native court, post office, and dispensary in Opobo Native Town on Opobo Island. Earlier that day the district officer for Opobo, Arthur Whitman, had made plans to meet with a group of prominent women from the local market and surrounding communities on the following morning to address their concerns. In this case, then, the senior representative of the colonial administration had invited the women to come to the Rest House for a meeting, though Whitman did not anticipate that women would arrive in such numbers. His failure to do so may reflect his conviction that “his” women would not be involved in making demonstration, and may explain why, as we will see below, colonial officials decided that the women who demonstrated were “prostitutes.” They believed they knew “their” women, and were certain that they would not undress for a meeting with the so-called colonial masters, much less bring “cudgels” and wear palm fronds. They could only conclude that the sexually loose and public women of Doctor’s Farm were responsible for the disorder wrought by the women.

After the incidents at Opobo Native Town and nearby Essene, Lieutenant Richard Hill’s platoon from the Third Battalion of the Nigeria Regiment traveled through the night by motor lorry to Consular Beach, where they arrived around 6:00 or 7:00 am on the morning of December 16. Hill described his platoon’s arrival in Opobo to the Birrell Gray Commission: “At the outskirts of Opobo station the road was blocked by about 300 women and they were carrying sticks, bricks and lumps of mud. I told the driver of the motor lorry to go full speed ahead through them and they cleared to either side of the road and threw the sticks, mud and bricks at the lorry. The driver of the lorry told me that they were shouting that they smelt blood and they did not mind the soldiers coming.” Yet in his subsequent testimony before the Aba Commission, Hill admitted that he never told Whitman about the incident since “it was not until I was on my way back that the driver told me what they were singing.” While the women sang as a part of their
larger performance and expected its meaning and significance to be readily apparent, Hill only gained even a rough translation *ex post facto* and retrospectively used it to defend his handling of the situation. He also claimed that it had been necessary to parade his troops before the crowd of women demonstrators, in direct contravention of official regulations, because “otherwise the factories would have been sacked roughly about the time I arrived here.” He remained insistent on this point despite the fact that the vast majority of women had passed the factories without incident on their way to the district office at Consular Beach, which even Whitman, Hill, and the European businessmen in Opobo conceded. Here again, the assumptions of the officer in question as to the women’s intentions—and his subsequent defense of his actions—rested solely on their appearance and gestures, not on the content of the aspersions directed towards him.27

Whitman originally scheduled his meeting with the women for 9:00 a.m., but, as hundreds of women clad only in loincloths and palm fronds arrived to express their grievances by chanting, singing, and dancing, Hill convinced him to start an hour early. Hill believed, as he stated repeatedly in his subsequent reports and testimony, that he would not be able to guarantee the safety of the British officials and other Europeans much longer. He was by no means the only British official unnerved by the women’s appearance, however. Whitman repeatedly cited female nudity as evidence of the women’s violent intent in his various accounts of the events at Opobo, while other colonial officials equated undress with carrying weapons. In his initial report on the incident, he noted that the large crowd of “excited, gesticulating women” were “dressed in narrow loin-cloth, not in their customary, clothes worn on peaceful occasions.” The medical officer for Opobo, Edward James Crawford, stated in the report on his inquiry into the shooting, written only eight days after the incident, that “if they came to the station merely to put their grievances before the D. O. they would have been dressed in their ordinary clothes and would never have come armed.” Captain Harvey, the assistant district officer, testified that he had “never seen a mass of women like that before.” When pressed further as to what was so unusual about the women, Harvey said, “I was not surprised at the noise…I was especially surprised to see women coming dressed like that with a complaint to the District Officer.” Unlike most of the other colonial officials in Opobo, Harvey did not mention the women’s dancing and singing as evidence of their hostility; their appearance alone startled him. The presence of a large crowd of uncovered African women seems to have been enough for Harvey to conclude that “they were a decidedly unruly mob.”28

Whitman met with six leaders of the women for roughly ninety minutes, during which time the women expressed their frustration and put forth a set of demands that would have to be addressed before they would end their demonstrations. Besides the concerns discussed earlier that were common to the areas affected by the Ogu, such as a guarantee from the government that women would not be taxed and that no personal property would be counted in the future, the women’s terms reflected their collective interests as traders in the local markets. For example, they insisted that the tax on men be abolished since this burden often fell upon the women in their communities, as their trading activities represented one of the primary sources of the currency required to pay the tax in most of their families.29 Then they insisted that Whitman distribute copies of a typed, official letter to each representative from the various groups of women in attendance, which listed their grievances and guaranteed that women would not be taxed. However, soon after Whitman finished distributing these, Lieutenant Hill and his troops commenced firing into the crowd, striking down at least two of the women’s representatives.

The women who converged on Consular Beach staged an impressive show of unity, but the British officials on the scene again failed to recognize the assembly as a demonstration of women *qua* women or to acknowledge the legitimacy of their concerns. The women warriors made it clear that they spoke for the women of Opobo Native Town, Bonny, Andoni, Kwa, Ogoniby, and Nkoro by including emissaries from each area in the group of six women who met with Whitman.30 Yet, from the start colonial officials...
associated the crowd of women almost exclusively with “prostitutes” from Doctor’s Farm, a native town about two miles outside of Egwanga. As Crawford explained in his testimony before the Birrell Gray Commission, “I anticipated there would be trouble and I went to the hospital at dawn. On my way there I heard shouting from the direction of Doctor’s Farm. The women there are mostly prostitutes, there must be hundreds of them there but I don’t know the number.” Crawford characterized the exceptional nature of the Ogu in terms of the women’s dress, linking it to the “evil reputation” of the residents of Doctor’s Farm. “While I was at the hospital a crowd of women of at least fifty strong, probably more, passed the side of the old prison, they were also stripped wearing palm fronds and carrying sticks…I have been five years in this country and I have never seen such a turbulent crowd before in this country…I had never seen this before even among the bush women.” The reputed presence of large numbers of prostitutes amongst the crowd and the conviction that uncovered African women portended a return to savagery—a popular trope of imperialist fiction and memoirs, as we have seen in Chapter 2 and will address at greater length in Chapter 7—became central to the logic undergirding colonial officials’ accounts of the events at Opobo. Indeed, Crawford returned to the subject of the women’s putative loose character at the end of his testimony. “Doctor’s Farm village has an evil reputation in the district for the number of prostitutes who live there,” he declared, adding, however that “some do other work as well.” For the first time in his account, Crawford conceded that some of the village women “do other work as well” but in a manner that continued to suggest that they represented a minority in comparison to those who worked as prostitutes. Employing a tautological form of reasoning, the British officials in Opobo identified Doctor’s Farm as the source of the disturbance on the basis of the women’s attire and menacing attitude, while claiming that the lascivious nature of the women there forced them to conclude that the growing crowd was “out for trouble” or “out for war.” The Birrell Gray Commission reproduced this interpretative framework in its finding. This ignores the fact that prostitutes at this time would have been better dressed—by British standards—than most rural women. As we have previously seen, senior women thought of prostitution as closely connected to younger women’s interest in dress and fashion, since younger women used the money they received for their services to buy foreign goods, including cloth. Thus it is unlikely that local prostitutes, who depended on the patronage of European men and their African male employees for their livelihood, participated to a significant degree in the demonstration at Opobo, and they hardly could be said to have been the “ringleaders.” Rather, British officials’ and businessmen’s conflation of the women at Consular Beach with prostitutes from Doctor’s Farm indicated a tendency to associate prostitution with nudity, women occupying public spaces—including in their roles as the guardians of the feminine space of the market—and sexual commerce with women’s trade in general. The British obsession with “prostitutes from Doctor’s Farm” therefore constituted a slander against the women’s character, one British officials felt they could readily get away with, but perhaps more importantly, it represented a direct association of the protesters’ nudity with out-of-control sexuality and what was perceived to be uncharacteristically feminine, violence.

Like Crawford, British colonial and military officers often repeated those points or episodes that they believed were most revealing in their final remarks during their testimony, which took the form of an oral report or monologue. In describing the layout of Opobo, C. T. Lawrence, the secretary for the Southern Provinces of Nigeria who composed the commission’s report, noted, “at a distance of about one-and-a-half miles, there is a village known as Doctor’s Farm, which is occupied by petty traders and women of loose character, a large proportion of whom appear to be natives of Opobo native town.” He then proceeded to describe the circumstances leading to the shooting at Consular Beach: “Throughout the night of the 15th–16th December, shouting and singing went on at Doctor’s Farm, where the women were evidently working themselves up into a state of excitement, and about 5:00 a.m. on the 16th, an abortive attack was made upon the factory of Messrs. G. B. Ollivant & Co., but was driven off by the agent (Mr. A.
C. Butler), who showed a determined front.” Lawrence identified the “women of loose character” from Doctor’s Farm alone as the would-be “looters.” What is more, his characterization of the women’s actions as “an abortive attack” appears to be without basis. Although Alfred Butler, the manager of G. B. Ollivant and Co., later told the Aba Commission that the women “probably would have torn me to pieces in the state of mind they were in on that Monday morning,” the only evidence that he produced to support this assertion was his claim that the women were “jeering” at him as they passed. In fact, Butler admitted that he knew one of the leaders of the women who was shot and killed because she was the wife of his clerk.

The British colonial and military officers maintained that the European women at Egwanga on December 16 represented the most likely targets of this violent mob. Whitman reminded the Birrell Gray Commission that “there were three European women in the station at the time…. There is no limit to what might have been done if the attack on the office had succeeded.” During the proceedings of the subsequent Aba Commission, Mr. Macaulay asked Whitman if he was suggesting that “the women would have attacked European women.” Whitman replied, “I do not suggest it, I am convinced of it.” The colonial officials responsible for the massacre at Consular Beach asserted the defense of white womanhood as a prime justification for their actions. As the most vulnerable members of the European population at Opobo, it followed that these three women would be the Igbo and Ibibio women’s first victims if the crowd could not be checked. Both government-appointed commissions left this assumption relatively unquestioned. The report of the Birrell Gray Commission defended the notion and emphasized the perilous nature of the situation through a series of common stereotypes of Africans. Lawrence asserted

that had the troops been overpowered, the Government offices would have been destroyed and the factories looted. The latter held large stocks of gin and other intoxicants, and had the savage passions of the mob become further inflamed by alcohol, it need hardly be said that the lives of the Europeans in the station, which included three ladies, would have been in the gravest danger. Indeed it is difficult to see how they could have escaped destruction.

So common within British colonial discourse that they “need hardly be said,” these preconceptions about the “savage passions” and penchants for liquor, sexual license, and violence of southeastern Nigerian women shaped both the perception of the British officials on the scene and subsequent interpretations of the Women’s War, and justified the officers’ actions in the view of the Colonial Office.

The testimony of southeastern Nigerian women like Ahudi of Nsidimo before the Aba Commission demonstrated, however, that far from targeting European women, the women of the Ogu believed that they had certain common interests with these women that might serve as the basis for a measure of solidarity. Ahudi chastised the commissioners and emphasized the novel nature of the women’s actions: “We ask you to bring peace to the land. You may take evidence for many days, but unless you come to a conclusion which will satisfy the women, we will follow you wherever you go. Formerly we never made demonstrations in this manner, but we do so now in order to show you that women are annoyed… . No doubt there are women like ourselves in your country. If need be we will write to them to help us.” In light of the remarks of Ahudi and others, it seems unlikely that the women at Consular Beach would have attacked their European counterparts. If anything, they expected sympathy from these other women and saw in them potential allies who would understand their frustration.

Although the women at Consular Beach neither engaged in looting nor injured a single European, in the end gunfire adjourned their meeting with the district officer. In describing the final moments before the shooting commenced, Whitman emphasized the vulnerability of the troops and particularly his own position vis-à-vis the crowd of women. “Captain Harvey who was standing near and had a clear view states that several women made threatening gestures behind my back. I myself was wholly unarmed; I had not even a stick in my hand.” Whitman noted that “as I handed over the papers it appeared as though the crowd immediately in front of me was about to disperse,” but “at that moment…there was a concerted
movement at both ends of the fence, on the flanks of the troops....” As the women, “now...in a state of frenzied uncontrol,” closed “in on myself and the other officials present and the troops, with cudgels and matchets raised,” he maintained, “The intention of the crowd was no longer in doubt.” Although he admitted that he “did not observe...the continued forward rush which necessitated a second volley [of gunfire],” Whitman insisted “that there was such a rush is beyond doubt.”

Lieutenant Hill claimed that the women had been armed with large cudgels and recounted to the Birrell Gray Commission how he found “the body of a woman at the back of the Post Office” with “a stick...still clenched in her hand.” Yet the officials at Opobo could produce only a few small sticks and tree limbs as evidence for the Aba Commission, and everyone involved conceded that they found no “matchets” after the shooting. Nevertheless, in his remarks before the Aba Commission, Whitman remained adamant that “if they had carried on their action, I have not the slightest doubt that I would not be here today.”

Lieutenant Hill fired the first shots into the representatives of the women meeting with Whitman. While Hill produced an equally harrowing tale, there were a number of inconsistencies between the two officers’ versions of the circumstances surrounding the massacre at Consular Beach. In his testimony before the Birrell Gray Commission, Hill recalled that, just as Whitman “turned to me,” “four or five women standing near him raised their sticks with the obvious intention of hitting the District officer on the head.”

I pushed him aside and they missed him. One blow only caught me on the left shoulder. We both jumped back and I drew my revolver... They took no notice and at the same time I heard the fence on the right give way...I therefore signaled [sic] to the District officer with my revolver that I was going to take over. Owing to the noise it was impossible to speak or shout. The District officer nodded...I then found the fence had been broken down and the women were streaming through, others were breaking in the fence outside the Court. I shouted again to them to stop. They took no notice. I then fired at the first woman...She was hit but it did not stop them...I shouted ‘fire’ that was all I could do; they could not hear any order for the noise but...when I fired, four or five men behind me fired two rounds before I gave my second order to fire. If this hadn’t been done we would have been knocked clear off our feet by the crowd—at least I should have been. The leading woman was only about two and a half yards from me when I fired.

As they depicted the situation, once the crowd turned on Whitman and Hill, who had given the women the benefit of the doubt in allowing the meeting to take place in such close quarters, the officers had no choice left but to fire. Otherwise they would have been pinned against the wall behind them, and the soldiers would have been “separated from their rifles” and “absolutely powerless.”

Yet, prior to December 14, colonial officials had dispersed large crowds of women either through negotiation or the use of police forces in numerous instances in both Owerri and Calabar provinces without resorting to firing on them, even where substantial destruction of property had taken place as at Aba. What is more, closer scrutiny reveals many of the claims put forward by the British officials at Consular Beach to be false. For instance, Whitman and Hill argued that the troops had been forced to fire a second volley because the first had failed to stop the “rush” of the crowd, though both also admitted that they could not actually see this for themselves. The coroner’s reports by Dr. Crawford, the medical officer at Opobo, provide the most detailed sources for ascertaining the women’s behavior once the shooting began. In fact, these appear to be more reliable than Crawford’s subsequent testimony before the Birrell Gray and Aba Commissions, which contained substantial discrepancies when compared with his reports. Crawford told the Birrell Gray Commission that “the wounds were caused by close range shots, some of the minor wounds were caused by ricochets, but most of the wounds were by close range fire. A lot of the wounds of the people who were killed were in the head and in the front of the body and upper limbs. I cannot remember the proportion but most of them were in the front.” His initial findings, however, including a chart listing the casualties and a detailed report describing the nature of injuries sustained by the victims, contradict this last assertion. According to Crawford’s report, of the twenty-five bodies he examined, eleven women had been shot in the back and seven in the side. Only five of the dead
had sustained wounds to the front of the body, and two of these were women at the front of the crowd, including Hill’s first victim, who was shot in the face. This suggests that, contrary to Hill and Whitman’s accounts of the incident, the majority of the women killed at Consular Beach had been shot while trying to flee the scene.

Despite the bloodshed at Opobo, the British military repeatedly encountered large crowds of women in the weeks and months that followed. Troops under the command of Captain Alfred McCullagh halted the advance of some four to five thousand on their way to the marketplace at Okpala on December 20. The women “were wearing native cloth round their waists, and were naked from there up.” When the district officer instructed them to return the warrant chiefs’ caps that they had seized and to disperse, McCullagh told the Aba Commission, “they kept interrupting, screaming, and waving their arms and shaking their fists,” while some “also pulled up their cloths and slapped their tummies under his nose,” a gesture meant to call attention to their status as mothers of the community. McCullagh ordered his troops to push back the crowd using their rifles butts, and in the ensuing melee at least of a couple of them accidentally fired their weapons; thinking that the captain had given the order to fire, another soldier shot a woman in the stomach. As the crowd withdrew McCullagh also noticed “two or three women who had been rather badly hit in the head by knocks from the butts of rifles.” The platoon followed the crowd for several miles at some distance until they reached the Obor market, where they found themselves surrounded by as many as fifteen thousand women. In describing the scene to the Aba Commission, McCullagh exclaimed, “I have never been so frightened in my life!” Yet after ignoring for several minutes his threat to fire on them if they did not sit down, “suddenly the whole crowd sat down,” leaving him thoroughly “flummoxed.” McCullagh then met several “head” women and repeated the district officer’s command to return the chief’s caps, telling them that “they would have to go away, otherwise they would be dispersed.” The women “addressed their various groups, and then brought in 14 Warrant Chief’s caps and laid them at my feet.” Although “a large section” expressed their displeasure at the “caps being given up,” the crowd ultimately became “more or less quiet” and “tractable.” Like Hill and Whitman at Consular Beach, McCullagh felt the vulnerability of his position acutely, but again the women’s actions belied his assertions and those of other British officials that the women demonstrators were undoubtedly out for blood.

While most casualties of the British suppression of the Ogu lost their lives or sustained injuries from rifle and machine gun fire at close range, the colonial government continued to pursue what today we might call a shock and awe strategy in the region to dissuade further outbursts of protest well into 1930, parading troops through disaffected areas and anchoring a battleship off the coast of southern Nigeria to attain the desired “moral effect.” In addition, district officers imposed staggering fines and ordered the burning of numerous villages as both “punishment” for their participation in the Ogu and as a measure to “bring pressure” on the local population to cease holding “subversive meetings” and surrender “ringleaders” in the community. At Jackson’s behest, Captain Cecil Chipper’s troops burned two villages in the southern part of the Aba district in late December, each consisting of twenty to twenty-five compounds. When the chief of Umu Okpara failed to produce in a timely manner the £450, three loads of yams, and other foodstuffs imposed in a collective fine, his compound was razed. In other instances at Ibakasi and Mbiafon Ikot, British officials fined the local chiefs for recalcitrance and burnt several compounds when they failed to muster enough men to serve as carriers in an expedient fashion. For colonial and military officers, these latter cases of banal—because casual and ubiquitous—violence hardly figured in their calculations of “collective punishment.” In the wake of the disturbances, a few officials objected to the imposition of further reprisals. Falk wrote in January 1930, “It is my considered opinion that heavy fines should not be levied, since the main objective after restoring law and order with a firm hand should be to avoid any impression that Government desires to punish vindictively those who
were stirred up by false rumours spread by unscrupulous agitators.” Yet, Falk not only once again denied the agency of the women participants and the legitimacy of their concerns here; he did not hesitate to employ collective punishment measures to restore “law and order.” During the British campaign against the women’s movement, Falk repeatedly ordered his subordinates to burn villages “to make the chiefs sue for peace.” Thus, his wife Helen wrote to her daughter on December 15, “people say that Daddy’s [i.e. Edward’s] latest slogan is ‘A village a day, keeps the riot away.’” As in numerous other instances in the annals of British imperialism, the Falks’ misapprehension of the Women’s War, which was buttressed by a self-assured confidence in their judgment and superiority and enforced by the military resources of the British Empire, culminated in tragedy for those subjected to colonial rule.

Conclusion

At least forty died at Consular Beach on December 16, and over fifty-eight southeastern Nigerian women lost their lives during the Women’s War overall. In each case in which colonial officials employed lethal force in the suppression of the Ogu, they believed that the women had no one but themselves to blame for the shootings. In short, the “howling mobs” of “Amazons” at Abak, Utu Etim Ekpo, and Opobo had forced the British officers on the scene to act. As Akpan and Ekpo point out, “it is incredible that government soldiers, armed to the teeth, could mow down unarmed women [at Opobo], without direct provocation, especially as there was no rioting, no looting and no serious disturbances at the time of the shooting.” Nevertheless, while the Aba Commission condemned the shootings at Abak and Utu Etim Ekpo on procedural grounds—like Dr. Crawford, the coroner who first investigated the incident, and the Birrell Gray Commission before them—they deemed the colonial officials’ actions at Opobo to be completely “justified.” In Chapter 7, we will attempt to come to a better understanding of what “justified” the attacks on unarmed female civilians during December 1929, as the massive demonstrations of indigenous women went from being the unthinkable to becoming the “standardized nightmare” of British colonial officials in southeastern Nigeria.
“More Deadly than the Male”: The Women’s War in the British Imagination

The accounts of Britons who confronted the women in December 1929 and suppressed their movement contain a number of striking elements that recur throughout their letters, reports, and testimonies before the Birrell Gray and Aba commissions. Perhaps the most puzzling is the failure of officials to mention the single most glaring feature of the disturbances—that they were undertaken exclusively by women—until after the massacre at Opobo. Another emerges from the imagery the men used to describe the threat they experienced at the hands of the women—that of being “swamped” by a “mass” of uncontrollable, shrieking, frenzied women, described alternately as Furies, Amazons, prostitutes, harridans, and viragoes. We think these phenomena are linked to one another, and that they stand at the heart of our ability to understand the behavior of colonial and military officers and the worldview that gave rise to their violent responses.

The initial attempts of British officials and other observers to report on, interpret, and account for the causes of the Women’s War never spoke of the women’s presence, let alone their agency or the gendered basis of their actions. Indeed, it was as if colonial and military officers in southeastern Nigeria were unable to mentally process the most remarkable characteristic of the events unfolding around them. Resident Edward Falk did not mention the gender of those involved in the disturbances in his personal correspondence until after the major clash at Opobo, referring to them instead as “natives,” “rioters,” “insurgents,” and “mobs.” His first reference to women appears in his correspondence with his wife, dated December 17; women never appear in the official diary he kept of the events. In the letter to his wife he admitted that “all this took us by surprise like the Indian Mutiny did.” In almost a throwaway line, he added, “The funny thing about it is that it’s a women’s riot on a scale the world has not seen for a long time…they are destructive Furies.” Helen also failed to record this remarkable feature of the disturbances in her private journal until December 19, almost two weeks after the outbreak began. Before that time, her entries referred obliquely to “natives,” such as when she noted that “the natives have very little pluck when they see that the Government [will] make a firm stand and will stand no nonsense. They have not much courage individually, but collectively they can be very nasty and very difficult to handle. A crowd of excited natives is very ugly indeed to meet, especially when the agitators [sic] have provided plenty of tombo [palm wine or other alcoholic drink] to produce courage…. But then on the 19th, describing the events at Aba, she wrote, “some women…went to the factories to sell their palm kernels and got a low price. This infuriated them to such an extent that they began to loot…, and in a short time huge crowds of half drunk and wildly excited women marched into Aba and went for the factories and simply stripped them before anybody did anything. The crowds consisting of women only made it very difficult to attack them.”

Unable or unwilling to believe that the growing movement involved women exclusively, colonial
officials regarded it as the beginning of a general uprising instigated by shadowy agitators. Falk and his wife also saw it as in part the product of misguided colonial policies. In their speculations regarding the sources of the trouble, they often linked these explanations, and both served to deny the independent initiative of the women. Falk asserted that a “big Native Society of the Ibos is working the show.” He lamented the fact “that they do have some legitimate grievances,” but largely placed the blame for activism on policies that sought to educate colonial subjects. “These sorts of things are bound to happen in what is after all a conquered country,” he pointed out, “in which the conquerors [sic] have been busily engaged teaching the people about the rights of man and the glorious British freedom of the subject.” Falk suggested again that the disturbances were the work of “native societies” which “are very numerous” and “very influential.” “There may be quite a lot of agitation from America,” he posited, “as in the so called Spirit Movement of 1927,” during which young men and women associated with the Qua Iboe Mission targeted elders, secret society members, and suspected witches while in ecstatic states. He saw foreign influence behind the “riots,” as if the subversive effects of a British education were not quite sufficient to do the trick. “The American negroes are far more civilized than the African negroes,” he wrote to his wife.

As they cannot overcome the Colour Bar, one of their aims is to stir up the African and unite the whole black race. They may quite well succeed in the end, though perhaps not in our time. But it is already obvious that this country will go the way of India if we continue to educate the natives as fast as it has been done during the last few years. We certainly do not make them happier.

Not surprisingly, Helen Falk expounded much the same view. The authorities at the colonial capital of Lagos and in the Colonial Office in London, she insisted in her journal, “are creating another India here as fast as they can, and one fine day the natives will turf the whole white population out. The half-educated negro is a disgusting specimen. The real pagan is the best of the lot.” For the Falks, as for other colonial officials, outside male agitators, whether African-American or members of the “half-educated” native intelligentsia, acted as the motive force animating events.

These omissions of women’s agency and, indeed, of women themselves can be seen in light of the phenomenon that Robert Proctor has called agnotology—the “cultural production of ignorance.” Following his lead and that of Londa Schiebinger, who developed the concept into a methodology designed to bring to light the political and cultural struggles involved in acts of forgetting, Jean Allman has called for us to ask what the disappearance and forgetting of actors—particularly women—in histories of Africa can tell us about a whole variety of things, including our notions of agency and subjectivity. In her attempt to recover the prominent Ghanaian nationalist Hannah Kudjoe—described by contemporaries as an “Amazonian tyrant” who could “ride men like horses”—for the story of Ghana’s independence movement, she discovered that Kudjoe was “disappeared” just as the new Ghanaian state came into being. The processes that built the state, especially the construction of a narrative of the nation’s emergence at the hands of male heroes like Nkrumah, affected the erasure of key female actors in the nationalist movement.

This is not exactly the same dynamic we find in the erasure of women from British accounts of the Women’s War. For one, officials and reporters ultimately did include women in their reports, but only after the incidents at Opobo on December 16. The shooting of the women there, though it did not bring the disturbances to an end, may well have provided British officials with enough confidence in their control over their emotional and mental processes to allow the women to enter into their frames of reference.

Once managed by gunfire, the threat these women posed to the psychic integrity of the men may have begun to ease sufficiently for them to be recognized and the impact of their behavior acknowledged. Falk, for instance, wrote to his wife on December 22 about the “nerve strain I’ve been through.” “I’ve never heard about a war with women before,” he confessed. “It’s no joke. They behave like the beastliest of men & deserve no pity on account of sex…. These great crowds of howling women armed with sticks are
One Colonial Office cadet, Assistant District Officer Richard Floyer, who lost his “kit” when he was “hustled by the mob” and got “a bit knocked about” by the crowds, seems to have been undone by his experiences at the hands of the women; he later displayed the symptoms of what we would call post-traumatic stress disorder. “A.D.O. Floyer...nerve shattered after events in December,” noted Falk in his January 9 entry to his official diary. Floyer may have been only the most visibly shaken by the events of the Women’s War. Helen Falk repeatedly mentioned in her journal that her husband was under tremendous “physical and mental strain.” We have to remember that Falk, like the majority of the other British officials and officers responding to the Women’s War, had most likely experienced trauma during the Great War; certainly the actions of the Ohandum in 1929 were often represented in the language of trauma. Traumatized people sometimes must “forget” certain incidents, Larry Ray has noted, if they are to be able to sustain enough psychic integrity to function. Forgetting and even outright denial of frightening events are part of the arsenal people use to defend against the psychic dissolution that might be brought about by such terrifying events.

“No ordinary women”

During the proceedings of the Aba Commission of Inquiry, Commissioner Macaulay questioned the district officer for Opobo, Arthur Whitman, about the appropriateness of using force to disperse the large demonstration at Consular Beach on December 16, especially considering that the participants consisted solely of women. Macaulay suggested “that you would not have acted in the same way had you been among the suffragettes in England.” In defending the shootings, which left at least forty dead and many more wounded, Whitman insisted, “There is no comparison at all.” The assertion of utter incommensurability between the demonstrating women of southeastern Nigeria and those of Britain lay at the heart of colonial officials’ understanding of the Women’s War of 1929, one which consistently reduced the women of the Ogu to an extreme manifestation of African savagery and offered a comforting, masculine narrative of European women’s fragility and distress.

Despite the attempts of Igbo and Ibibio women to demonstrate that they had mobilized on their own initiative and in defense of shared interests as the women of the community, British colonial and military officers consistently failed to recognize the Ogu as a gendered action or a legitimate expression of protest within the context of the local political culture. Indeed, they repeatedly denied the applicability of and even inverted western assumptions regarding gender difference in their characterizations of the events of late 1929. A related set of conclusions regarding the Women’s War followed from this central premise, on the basis of which officials in southeastern Nigeria unleashed a remarkable degree of violence on crowds of women demonstrators, as we have seen above, in at least three separate incidents.

In the aftermath of the Women’s War, British colonial and military officers attempted to describe experiences that were no doubt all too real and threatening to them. Colonial officials in Britain and Nigeria perceived and represented the Ogu as a conflagration of riotous mobs of savage and frenzied Africans, finally revealed in the record to be women. Over and over again, British colonial and military officers cited in their correspondence, commission reports, and memoirs the women’s nature and demeanor as evidence of their intentions. It was not simply the women’s behavior that so disturbed the British officials; rather, the women’s extraordinary appearance, particularly their confronting them in a state of undress, meshed with preexisting discourses concerning African women and sexuality, producing an image of extreme disorder in the minds of these men. This crowd of disrobed women, by the very fact of their “out of category” dress, threatened to dissolve the proper colonial order and consume them along with it. The report of the Birrell Gray Commission also cited the lack of clothing normally worn by the women as an indication of their malicious intentions. “The greater part, if not all, of the women were
armed with stout cudgels and in place of the voluminous clothing usually worn by the native women in Opobo, were... stripped to the waist and wore only old loin cloths... It was therefore manifest that their intentions were hostile and that their attitude was far removed from that of women who were going to have a peaceful meeting with the District officer.” [our italics] The women’s exposed breasts and uncorseted lower torsos presumably demonstrated “that their intentions were hostile.”

At Opobo, colonial officials and the members of the Birrell Gray Commission after them saw only a “mob” of “howling,” “spitting,” and “frenzied” prostitutes. The report of the latter’s findings attributed the “increasingly unreasonable and frivolous” demands of the women at Consular Beach to their licentious character. “Mr. Whitman,” the report noted, “also took down as one of the complaints a demand that known prostitutes were to be arrested, but when the note was handed to them, they informed him that this was a mistake upon his part and that what they wanted was that prostitutes should not be arrested. The solicitude thus shown throws a light upon the class of women of which the ringleaders were composed.”

The women’s subsequent testimony before the Aba Commission casts considerable doubt on the accuracy of Whitman’s statement. Yet, regardless of its validity, it is revealing that Major Birrell Gray chose to emphasize this minor detail in his brief, ten-page report as an indication of the demonstrators’ character and intentions. For British officials, it appears that a crowd of almost nude African women could only be prostitutes out for blood. One form of excess—sexual—confirmed the presence of the other—violence.

Officials’ perceptions of the *Ogu*, which in turn compelled their violent reaction to it, derived from a litany of assumptions regarding southeastern Nigerian women circulating within British culture in the form of imperialist fiction and colonial memoirs. The conflation of African women’s naked bodies and sexuality, on the one hand, and their supposed exceptional strength and ferocity, on the other, colored Britons’ understanding of the women’s actions and rendered them unable to recognize the reality of women mobilizing in defense of their common interests against the encroachments of men, British and African alike. Thus colonial men’s understanding of the situation at Aba, Abak, Utu Etim Ekpo, and Opobo was inseparable from a common set of epistemological categories—or, in the words of Clifford Geertz, “socially established structures of meaning”—that rendered external realities comprehensible both in the heat of the moment and after the fact. Crucially, British apprehension of the women’s actions did not include the possibility that the women acted self-consciously as women and on the basis of a perceived commonality of interests that extended to some degree even to their European sisters.

From the first reports of the shooting deaths of scores of local women, senior officials in the British Colonial Office and the colonial government in Nigeria unreservedly defended the actions of colonial and military officials in southeastern Nigeria, a stance that remained unchanged as more information came to light and the Aba Commission published its report on the events of the Women’s War. From the start, their evaluations of the officers’ behavior and their *apologia* for the men’s actions drew upon a distinction between those who had participated in the *Ogu* and others of the “gentler sex.”

As news of the shooting at Opobo reached London, Governor Thomson implored Secretary of State for the Colonies, Lord Passfield (Sydney Webb), to bear in mind that the “officers concerned were in an extremely difficult position.” Glossing the murderous consequences of their actions, Thomson suggested that the officers who had fired on the women “were fully aware both of the influence and great physical strength of the women of these parts of the Southern Provinces [but] at the same time they were prevented by motives of chivalry from resorting to violent measures while they believed that there was any possible alternative.” In response to the findings of the Aba Commission, J. E. W. Flood, a senior member of the Colonial Office, wrote to his colleague, A. Fiddian:

In connection with the disturbances generally, I think a bit too much fuss has been raised by the fact that the victims were of the gentler sex. We are liable to forget that the King of Dahomey’s Amazon bodyguard was not a fiction, but an unpleasant fact, and if a howling mob of excited female savages who would be quite ready to tear a man in pieces with their hands is about the place, the only thing to do...
is to take strong action. [To which Fiddian scribbled a reply of “I quite agree” in the margins] It is quite easy for us to criticise them here, but I wonder what anyone in this Office would do in a similar situation. So far as I am in a position to judge, I think that too much forbearance was shown in several places with the usual result of over lenience to disorder.13

We might dismiss these remarks as simply a case of looking after one’s own. Yet what if we take seriously Flood’s suggestion that “anyone in this Office” would have reacted in the same manner? After all, in three separate instances different British colonial and military officers confronted crowds of southeastern Nigerian women, came to similar conclusions regarding their demeanor and intentions, and responded with lethal force, despite the absence of violent provocation on the part of the demonstrators.

Numerous witnesses provided vivid descriptions of the terrifying character of the women warriors. To articulate and emphasize the nature of the threat they felt, they drew heavily upon a corpus of popular representations of African women in British culture. Their accounts reveal the outlines of a preexisting symbolic system through which the women’s actions were comprehended and subsequently narrated. British colonial officials’ perception of and reaction to the Ogu Umunwaanyi interpellated its participants alternately as a riotous looting mob, violent crowds of drunken prostitutes, “enormous” or old, naked women, and a swarming, chaotic mass of “savage” women looking to tear a man “in pieces.”

Scholars have usually treated the testimony of British colonial and military officers before the Birrell Gray and Aba commissions as either distortions intended to shield themselves from accusations of wrongdoing or simply as further evidence of their brutality and indifference towards the women. The latter merely offers a judgment of their behavior without deepening our understanding of it. The first tendency, however, discounts or completely discards some of the most telling sources produced by the investigations into the incidents of the Women’s War and the British officials’ response. The accounts of the military and colonial personnel who used firearms to disperse largely unarmed women should not be dismissed as simply “false” representations or solely as attempts to disguise the “real events,” any more than they should be accepted uncritically as the reliable accounts of the Ogu.

Rather, we suggest that they be seen as indications of the reality produced in the minds of these men as they perceived and understood the women’s movement and subsequently came to represent it. This approach allows us to consider rhetorical figures and contemporary discourses of racial and gender difference, inseparable from officials’ apprehension of “reality,” as not only tools enabling description but in part constitutive of British colonial officials’ experience. When read in this light, these sources offer a glimpse of the historically and culturally specific Weltanshauung of late imperial Britain. The problem then becomes not only to recount the circumstances under which British colonial and military officers saw the Ogu Umunwaanyi as a threat serious enough to necessitate a display of violent force, but also to unearth the epistemological and ontological lens through which the women’s behavior appeared as such to their colonial observers.

Mr. Commissioner Sanders

A number of widely held stereotypes in imperial Britain during the interwar period informed colonial officials’ reactions to and subsequent representations of the Women’s War. Novelist Edgar Wallace’s Sanders series provides an exceptional window into some of the most prominent images of colonial Africa circulating within British society and its popular culture at the time of the Women’s War. Contemporary conceptions of gender and racial difference informed Wallace’s narratives, which first appeared in 1920, and their positive reception reflected long-standing and deeply held beliefs within British culture. But they and other imperial literature appearing after the Great War also yield evidence of the new threat that racialized, gendered, and sexualized “others” posed to the postwar generation. All the books in the Sanders series enjoyed tremendous popularity among the British public, especially among
young men. Yet beneath the prevalent racist stereotypes, Wallace’s characterization of “native” behavior and the necessity of controlling it spoke to a variety of anxieties over contemporary social upheavals and change within the metropole as well as throughout the empire.

These anxieties coalesced particularly in Wallace’s representation of the pathological crowd of natives and the sensual/threatening nature of African woman. The same discourses sustaining Wallace’s depiction of British West Africa profoundly influenced the men who represent the foci of this study; they were, in essence, produced from the same mold as the fictional Mr. Commissioner Sanders. Indeed, historian Anthony Kirk-Greene, who served in the Colonial Service in Nigeria during 1949, maintained that Sanders of the River was one of the primary “African readings” for aspiring colonial officers before the Second World War. For Kirk-Greene, there was a “degree of substance” in the image of Sanders as the archetypal man on the spot.14 Many of the images – even some of the arguments – that British colonial officials employed in their reports, testimony, and memoirs on the Women’s War also appear in Wallace’s text; these images are, so to speak, full of history and saturated with affective power for their British consumers. In one particularly revealing instance, Wallace characterized the dilemma of Sanders’s position vis-à-vis his African subjects as follows:

He governed a people three hundred miles beyond the fringe of civilisation. Hesitation to act, delay in awarding punishment, either of these two things would have been mistaken as weakness amongst a people who had neither power to reason, nor will to excuse, nor any large charity…The people understand punishment to mean pain and death, and nothing else counts.15

In their correspondence, reports, and testimony, officials involved in the suppression of the Ogu, the subsequent commissions of inquiry, and in the Colonial Office in London echoed these preconceptions regarding the disposition of Africans. For example, Lieutenant Richard Browning of the Third Battalion, Nigeria Regiment defended his decision to employ a Lewis machine gun to disperse women demonstrators approaching Utu Etim Ekpo in similar terms:

Had we taken a passive attitude and remained at Utu Etim Ekpo camp I think we would have been swamped in that wide area if two or three mobs had advanced on us and we could have done nothing…In my opinion when dealing with natives to use half-hearted measures is hopeless; they get more confident and look on leniency and hesitation as weakness.

Likewise, in absolving officials on the ground of any wrongdoing, the report of the Birrell Gray Commission concluded that “mobs, more especially if they are composed of primitive and ignorant people, are apt to mistake forebearance for weakness and act accordingly.”16 When read alongside one another, these excerpts highlight the intimate relation of—indeed, the impossibility of wholly distinguishing—popular and official understandings of racial difference and the practice of British imperialism. They also introduce a recurring trope within British officials’ accounts of the Women’s War and British imperial discourse more generally. Complacency or hesitancy to act in the face of “disorder” or in response to challenges to Britain’s authority in its African colonies would only encourage “native” insolence and jeopardize colonial control. Thus, the participants in the 1929 Ogu were always already implicated within a British imperialist worldview that was inseparable from the reality of the former’s behavior in the eyes of colonial officials.

Like most imperialist fiction, there are few female characters in Wallace’s novel, but they perform an important symbolic function within the narrative. “The construction of ‘native’ or ‘colonial subject’ in colonial discourse,” Barbara Bush has argued, “was a masculine trope and African women exist in colonial accounts as silent icons of the primitive – the ultimate ‘others’…Embedded within male texts were real fears of powerful female sexuality and the resistant black woman who had to be firmly controlled as a threat to the stability of colonial society.”17 As with the African female characters in Sanders of the River, the women who participated in the Ogu appear simultaneously as sexual objects and potential sources of danger in the accounts of colonial officials. At the same time, these also point to
the centrality of gender and sexuality to the British imperial imagination, particularly the set of binaries that sustained it, as discussed above in Chapter 2. Within this culturally- and historically-specific system of meaning, gender and sexuality served to represent racial difference and the relations underpinning British colonial rule in West Africa.

Wallace’s fiction shared a market with—and in many respects gained legitimacy from—a larger body of imperialist narratives, many of which claimed to be based on firsthand experience while trafficking in tropes familiar to imperialist fiction and popular mythology. For our purposes, the published account of Frank Hives, a district commissioner in Nigeria in the years before World War I, is particularly interesting. First published in 1930, the book, entitled *Ju-Ju and Justice in Nigeria*, recounted Hives’s adventures in terms that are not only reminiscent of imperialist fiction like *Sanders of the River* but also prefigure British officials’ representations of the Women’s War. In fact, the volume’s title itself reproduced a familiar binary underlying the British imperial imaginary in coupling “ju-ju”—a form of magic that, like the slave trade and cannibalism, a staple of imperialist fiction and travel narratives, was used as an unproblematic marker of barbarism—and “justice”—an equally transparent symbol of the supposedly civilizing impact of British colonial expansion.

The penultimate chapter of *Ju-Ju and Justice in Nigeria*, titled suggestively “Peaceful Penetration,” employed a number of themes, images, and narrative techniques that reoccur in British officials’ accounts of the Ogu. Hives offered one particularly brutal scene as being emblematic of the Africans he encountered, a strategy employed not only by authors like Edgar Wallace but also by the colonial officials in defense of their response to the Women’s War. While continuing his “sketching and map-making” tour to Okpoma, Hives “met a party of natives of both sexes.” “Just as the last one…was abreast of me,” he recounted, “a young, well formed woman, who was carrying an empty basket on her head, said something in her own language…that made the other women shriek with laughter. Whereupon a powerfully built young man who had just passed me ran back to her, drew his matchet, and with one blow struck off her head.” Hives confessed that he “felt very sick at the sight of this, and very like running amok among the lot of them” but he restrained himself. His translator, Odong, “told me that the young woman had said, loudly enough for the other women to hear—and her husband too—’Ah, there’ (pointing to me) ‘is a nice straight-haired man with whom I will sleep tonight.’” Hives claimed that he was troubled by his own unwitting complicity in the bloody episode and took a valuable lesson from the ordeal, stating “I felt in a way that I had been responsible for this brutal murder, so I kept my helmet on in future [sic], in case any more ‘ladies’ might be tempted to admire my straight hair.” He concluded the vignette by asserting that “the incident served to show the kind of mentality I had to deal with, and the nature of the customs I was up against.” The ambiguity of this statement leaves the reader unsure whether he was referring to the sexual desires of the African woman or the violent response of her husband. Indeed, we contend that this slippage in the text is productive inasmuch as it links these characteristics of the African “mentality” as if they are two sides of the same coin, and is similar in this respect to the British authorities’ representations of the Ogu.

Following this introductory and, Hives would have us believe, exemplary tale, “Peaceful Penetration” proceeded with a more lengthy adventure, one more directly threatening to the protagonist. Continuing his trek, Hives arrived at Okpoma and was informed that the local inhabitants were concluding a “‘play,’ that is, a dancing and drumming party accompanied by feasting.” This news left Hives feeling ill at ease. “I did not quite like the idea of this,” he admitted, “knowing that at such times the natives were none too easy to deal with, being worked up by excitement and tumbo so that they were capable of committing all kinds of excesses.” The British officials responsible for the violent suppression of the Ogu (and their apologists within the Colonial Office) also deployed this notion of Africans working themselves into a “frenzy” and thus “capable of committing all kinds of excesses” to justify their actions. Moreover, like
Hives’s account and Wallace’s *Sanders of the River*, they often suggested that the consumption of alcohol played some, if not a decisive, role in this process, despite evidence that this was unlikely.

Hives continued his story by reporting his translator’s impressions of the local people. Odong advised Hives to forego his plans to stay the night in the marketplace at Okpoma as “all the people had had a very bad play… They had all been drinking, the women being as bad as the men.” The passage is revealing not simply because it perpetuated a common trope of British discourse on Africans. Perhaps more importantly, it suggested that disorder in the realm of proper gender roles—“the women were as bad as the men”—be read as an ominous portent of things to come. We have, of course, seen this same equation of the inversion or disruption of European gender norms with the threat of violence and social upheaval in official renderings of the *Ogu*.

Hives represented the Africans he encountered in terms strikingly similar to those used to depict the participants of the Women’s War: “Along came a seething mob of half-drunk natives, screaming defiance at me, and waving machetes, spears and war sticks.” Soon thereafter, following his narrow escape, he repeatedly described his pursuers as a “brown mass” or, in other words, as an undifferentiated yet racially marked mass. In this way, Hives set up a familiar binary between the frenzied, “seething mob” of disorderly Africans and the cool, collected colonial officer. Indeed, he asserted, “I am positive that my show of indifference saved me and the members of my party from being hacked to death on the spot.” Yet there remained a significant gap between his external nonchalance and his internal feelings, exposing an undercurrent of anxiety over his charade. “While it was going on,” he confessed, “I was in a state of frozen horror.”

This might be seen as a parallel to colonial officials’ deeper anxieties over the discrepancy between the assertion of colonial authority in West Africa and the relative paucity of British military strength and manpower on the ground. Lieutenant Colonel Pritchard’s unpublished memoir “More Deadly Than the Male” provided a similar instance—not surprisingly, at the moment when he was faced with a throng of women protesters—while being at pains to contrast his own cool demeanor and rigid form with the inchoate mass of Africans. “When I looked down on the swarming, shrieking mob below I became very conscious of our weakness in numbers… If the news of our paucity of our strength leaked out, then we might indeed be in for trouble.” There is an uncanny resemblance between Pritchard’s account and that of his literary predecessor. Both used juxtaposition and contrast to characterize their encounters as a meeting of opposites; both articulated anxieties over the potential discrepancy between projected and actual strength vis-à-vis the amassed women. Like Pritchard’s memoir, Hives’ account foreshadowed elements of the testimony and official reports of those who employed extreme force to suppress the *Ogu*.

Britons regularly testified to the powerful and frightening threats Africa presented to their rule and their very existence. District Officer Hives, for example, recounted an encounter with an Igbo witch, “the most hideous old woman I had ever seen”:

She wore no clothing except a ragged and dirty loin-cloth, which barely reached her calloused knees. Her wrinkled and leathery skin was blacker than that of any native I had seen, except at the elbows and knuckles, where it showed a grayish-white… she wore wristlets and armlets fashioned like snakes. Round her shoulders was twined a rather-the-worse-for-wear stuffed black snake, while in her hands she held what I at first took for a live snake but which was a piece of charred cane. … she glared at me from a single bloodshot eye in a malevolent fashion, and started a flow of language which I could easily have recognized as abuse even had I not been able to pick out an epitaph here and there. All the time she talked, or rather shrieked this abuse, she danced about with wonderful agility for anyone of the age she appeared to be, and twisted the cane in her hands until if looked for all the world like a snake about to strike.

Hives found himself unable to order her removal, “for I felt as though I were being hypnotized, and could only stare blankly at her.” When Hives came out of his trance, “when I had collected my senses after this extraordinary scene,” as he put it, he was told by his interpreter that “she had put a snake curse on me. From this time onwards snakes would haunt me wherever I might go, day and night. Eventually a deadly
one would get me and I should die a horrible death at no distant date.”

Here Hives’ account recalls one of the most significant and memorable characters in all of western literature about Africa, the witch Gagool in H. Rider Haggard’s King Solomon’s Mines. Gagool condenses a number of images of African women that resonated so forcefully in the minds of contemporary and subsequent Britons. As Graham Greene recounted in his memoir, The Lost Childhood, “if it had not been for that romantic tale of Allan Quatermain, Sir Henry Curtis, Captain Good, and, above all, the ancient witch Gogool [sic], would I at nineteen have studied the appointments list of the Colonial Office and very nearly picked on the Nigerian Navy for a career? And later, when surely I ought to have known better, the old African fixation remained.”

The genre of the colonial memoir developed in close relation to imperialist fiction as the British reading public came to expect the accounts of colonial officials to offer the same combination of exoticism and high adventure provided by novels. Both Haggard and Edgar Wallace spent a significant amount of time in South Africa—the former as a colonial official and the latter as a member of the British military and later a journalist—while G. A. Henty covered a number of expansionist wars as a foreign correspondent. Their appeal lay in part in the credibility these exploits gave them, while their subsequent literary output provided colonial administrators with an established structure for representing their own experiences. The travelogue and literary depictions of Africa and Africans had a powerful and enduring impact on readers. And, as Greene intimated and later film representations would bear out, Britons possessed no capacity to distinguish one area of Africa from another or one group of Africans from another. In their ignorance of African realities, they endowed all Africans, and particularly African women, with singular characteristics. In the interwar period, among those characteristics was the African female’s capacity to annihilate British men.

In Sanders of the River as well, seductive African women took on lethal qualities. Sanders’ encounters with the only two African women in the novel reveal telling parallels to colonial officials’ reports and testimony about their experiences during the Women’s War; in each instance, Sanders comes to the brink of his own extinction. Daihili, described as a “slim girl, taller than the average woman, with a figure perfectly modelled,” has the power to drive men mad by her dancing. Already one British sub-commissioner had been sent home because of his infatuation with her; a second, who was sent out to keep an eye on Daihili and her tribe, succumbed to her charm as well, and at her inducement behaved in a way designed to bring disgrace on all Britons. Sanders heard tales of “people who had been punished unjustly, of savage floggings administered by order of the sub-commissioner,” and hurried upriver to see for himself what was happening. “Because of this slim girl who danced,” reported a native informant to Sanders, “many men, councillors, and captains of war had died the death.” She had once compelled a great king to send soldiers against the fictional Icheli people, “and neither man, woman nor child escaped.” Even the powerful Sanders, indifferent to women generally and immune to the seductions of native women in particular, fell under her sway, and he “went out of his way to avoid her.” When, after another massacre provoked by Daihili, he asked her, “how many men have you killed in your life?” she replied, “many men.”

As the future colonial officer learned from a young age through adventure fiction, self-mastery and sexual control were part of the “qualifications” for his position as “father” to his “savages.” As Barbara Bush has noted, “repression and the control of animal instincts,” so prevalent in the sexuality of the colonized, represented a fundamental component of “superior, civilised behaviour.” Sanders demonstrated just this superiority in his refusal to respond to Daihili’s overtures. Denied the opportunity to seduce the colonial officer, Daihili—who had “a mind for rebuffs, and...a score to settle with Mr. Commissioner Sanders”—demanded retribution. “‘Sandi,’ she said, ‘once you put me to shame, for when I would have danced for you, you slept.’ ‘To you, Daihili,’ said Sanders steadily, ‘I say nothing; I make no palaver with women, for it is not the custom or the law. Still less do I talk with dancing girls. My business
is with Limbili the king.” Daihili, however, had her revenge; the king forced Sanders to “dance” barefoot across “smoking hot” stones for her. Though rescued in the end, Sanders’s encounter with Daihili had brought him to the brink of death and reduced him to “an inert heap.”

In Wallace’s novels, African women’s unclothed, dancing bodies and sexuality were inseparable from the threat of violent death.

The cultural productions of British colonialism, encompassing fiction, memoirs, and film, provided the mental and emotional context within which colonial officials “walked around” as they went about their business administering the empire, and they informed their conceptions of West African peoples, especially women. Lugard, for example (if Perham is to be believed), picked up a Rider Haggard novel en route to East Africa in the 1890s. Graham Greene, as we have seen, entered the colonial service with Rider Haggard’s visions dancing in his head. Kirk-Greene confessed that colonial officers tried to emulate Edgar Wallace’s Mr. Commissioner Sanders, while Wallace, for his part, drew upon colonial records to paint his portraits of British colonial life in West Africa. In just one concrete example, Wallace used the 131-ton steam yacht, the Ivy, which the British obtained in 1895 to patrol and tour the Niger River protectorate, as the model for the Zaire, the boat Sanders utilized to oversee his territorial responsibilities.

Joyce Cary’s novel based on his time in West Africa, The African Witch, culminated in a women’s war. Though set in northern Nigeria, where he had been stationed, the novel clearly drew upon the information Cary gleaned from the Aba Commission’s Notes of Evidence, a copy of which was found among his papers. All of this testifies to the existence of a kind of feedback loop or cultural circuit by means of which British understandings of the behavior of southeastern Nigerian women in the 1920s were formed. British officials’ consequent inability to comprehend or attend to women’s grievances would result in the outbreak of the Women’s War in 1929; their misrecognition of the meanings of the actions those women took to articulate their dissatisfaction would lead them to use deadly force to defend against the annihilation the women seemed to promise.

Contemporary British understandings of the physiology and “nature” of southeastern Nigerian women reduced the participants of the Women’s War to the most threatening characteristics attributed to Africans in general. Colonial and military officers’ tendency to associate the exposed, dancing bodies of African women with unrestrained sexuality and violence was rooted in the British colonial imagination. As we have seen, the association of African women, sexuality, and danger were not new for Britons, and the sexual connotations of African femaleness had long been associated with the threat of violence. Now, however, they carried a charge unknown in earlier years; the proportions assumed by the threat to one’s very existence knew virtually no bounds.

The sexuality of African women became conflated, in a number of West African colonial accounts, with death. Colonial officials in southeastern Nigeria equated the exposed bodies of Igbo and other southeastern Nigerian women with transgression of the proper order, physical danger, and the loss of imperial power, and they represented this threat by recalling, however subconsciously, common literary tropes. Perhaps no British official in southeastern Nigeria during the Ogu illustrates this link more fully than Lieutenant Colonel P. F. Pritchard. He told the Aba Commission about his encounter with the women assembled at Okpoma (that same Okpoma where Frank Hives had earlier been witness to the “bad play”). When asked, “had you any police?” Pritchard gave a terse “No, Sir” in reply, then proceeded without further prodding to describe the women’s appearance and behavior. “I saw that the women were being led by an old woman who had no clothes on, except some leaves round her neck. The women seemed to be under the influence of this woman, and they were acting in a strange manner. Some lay on the ground and kicked their legs into the air, some passed most offensive remarks and made obscene gestures.”

Pritchard stated that he did not know if this woman came from Okpoma or elsewhere, but emphasized “her enormous size” and reiterated once again that she had a “great deal of influence with these people.” Years later, he recounted his experiences during the Women’s War in his unpublished memoir, entitled...
More Deadly than the Male." "To call for troops to deal with an outbreak of women may seem a drastic and unnecessary measure," he wrote, "but these were ‘no ordinary women.’ In toughness and a potential ability to make trouble they were a far more potent force than their menfolk.” Like the suggestive title of the piece, these prefatory remarks deployed racial difference to differentiate the demonstrating women from others of the “gentler sex” and invert western assumptions of female passivity and vulnerability. Identifying southeastern Nigerian women as “no ordinary women” allowed Pritchard to bring their “ability to make trouble” to the fore in a manner characteristic of imperialist adventure fiction.

Like Flood before him, Pritchard invoked the mythical strength and viciousness of the “Amazon” warriors of the King of Dahomey to corroborate this statement. “Seventy years before this date,” he explained, “an army from the neighboring territory of Dahomey had invaded Nigeria and attacked Abeokuta. One third of this invasion force were women and the fame of the ‘Amazons’ of Dahomey became legendary.”33 Pritchard’s colleagues shared this evaluation of the women of southeastern Nigeria. Commissioner Graham Paul stated during the proceedings of the Aba Commission, “It seems to me rather curious that when taxation agitation became agitation against tax altogether, and not only against taxation of women, that the agitation still remained exclusively in the hands of the women.” John Jackson, the district officer of Aba, responded, “I think there was a reason for that. It was guile. They thought they could achieve their object by putting forward the weaker ones, although I am now inclined to think they are the stronger ones.”34 While Jackson depicted the women as little more than pawns, he also stressed their relative ferocity. As discussed above, Falk also maintained that the participants in the Women’s War “deserve no pity on account of sex.” Yet, later in the same letter to his wife, he suggested that “it’s the men who egg on the women to do these things in the belief that the white man will allow any woman to do just what she likes. Then when the authorities are paralyzed the men help to plunder & destroy.”35 Jackson’s and Falk’s remarks indicated a more general tension between two prevalent images of African women that recurred in colonial and military officers’ accounts of the Women’s War. They often characterized them as at one and the same time an undifferentiated mass of unwitting dupes and ferocious “beldames.” Some, like Pritchard, resolved this tension by singling out a particularly menacing nude woman as the leader of the frenzied crowd—a “witch” figure not unlike those found in the books of Haggard, Wallace, and Hives. Others, including Falk and Jackson, simply combined an image of female ferocity equal to, if not exceeding, that of African men with an explicit denial of the women’s initiative and agency.

Pritchard’s largely inaccurate account of the demonstration and shootings at Opobo provides another illustrative example. The fact that he did not witness the incident, along with the established form of the colonial memoir, allowed him to indulge in liberties that were not possible in the more circumscribed context of an official report or testimony before a government commission:

The Political Officer ‘put me in the picture’ and I heard, for the first time, of a very ugly incident which had just occurred. A subaltern from another battalion of the Nigeria Regiment had been despatched, like me, with a small force, to a trouble spot not far away. On arrival he made his headquarters in the local Court House. A very large crowd of women gathered outside and the officer went forward to try and persuade them to disperse. While talking to them he was suddenly felled to the ground by a savage blow over the head. His troops, seeing their officer lying on the ground and at the mercy of the mob, quite understandably opened fire. The range was point blank and the women were densely massed. Behind them was a precipitous river bank. As the troops’ volley crashed into them, panic ensued. Many were killed or wounded and the rest broke and ran, many falling into the river below. Several years after I read the official account of this incident and there is no doubt that the story I was now being told was substantially true. I was convinced that every precaution would have to be taken in our dealings with the local population for there was no doubt their blood was up.36

Most British officials did not go as far as Pritchard in allowing factual details to be subordinated so completely to preexisting tropes in their depiction of events. Yet his narrative exhibited many of the themes and imaginative tendencies that characterized official accounts, such as the conflation of the women demonstrators with the “local population” in general and the notion that use of violent force represented the most cautious course of action when dealing with the “densely massed” crowd whose
blood was up.” Colonial officials associated the women’s failure to behave in a manner conforming to British notions of propriety with a predilection for violence and excess, and characterized them as prostitutes or, in the case of the female elders among the demonstrators, as enormous, bewitching “viragos,” “beldames,” and “harridans.” Again, at no point did the possibility that the Ogu represented a mass mobilization of southeastern Nigerian women in defense of their shared interests as women enter into their estimation of the events. In alternately representing the participants of the Women’s War as “frenzied mobs” of prostitutes and old (i.e., beyond childbearing age), abnormally large women, officials linked the women’s relatively unclothed bodies to a fearsome and transgressive sexuality as well as to extreme physical strength and barbarity. In the face of such a clear and unprecedented threat, excessive patience and forbearance was not only dangerous but actually encouraged disorder and “savage” excesses. As Falk explained to his wife, “The negro race is subject to these fierce waves of excitement & then they don’t know what they are doing. But hard hitting sobers them at once, as we discovered on both occasions.”

Prostitutes, “Beldames,” and “Truculent Mobs” Nearly all British accounts of the Women’s War of 1929 articulated the threat of violence through references to the unclothed bodies of the women. The British officials under consideration here equated women’s non-reproductive sexuality and especially their exposed bodies and sex organs with the dissolution of boundaries, loss of control over their faculties and the situation before them, as well as potential death. Take, for example, Lieutenant Hill’s representation of the women demonstrators before the shooting at Opobo:

At the time the crowd were [sic] pressing against the light bamboo fence, they were all shouting and waving sticks. I estimated the crowd at 400 women of all ages; there were no children; some were nearly naked wearing only wreaths of grass round their heads, waist and knees and some were wearing tails made of grass...Some abused me in English and one took off her loin cloth and told me that I was the son of a pig and not of a woman. I was told that the others were speaking in native dialect were telling the soldiers to cut their throats...Each time a new batch of women arrived the frenzy of the mob increased.

Notice the logic at work here: “there were no children,” and “some were nearly naked;” indeed, they were even said to wear “tails made of grass,” that ultimate sign of African “bush” inhumanity. These were therefore obviously not respectable, virtuous or well-disciplined women. Hill coupled the exposed genitalia of the woman with verbal abuse (something that the women themselves would have agreed to) and the threat of physical violence (something the women would not have admitted). As we have seen, colonial officials often discussed the two—the naked, African female body and “disorder” or the threat of violent destruction—as if they were indistinguishable.

There are two forms in which women appeared to the colonialists to be particularly aggressive and threatening: the individual woman as “prostitute” or “virago” on the one hand, and women en masse on the other. Both images were deployed to emphasize the insidious intentions of the assembled women, and often the distinctions between the two were blurred. Women en masse—in mobs or hordes or crowds—became, in the men’s accounts, prostitutes. Captain Blackburne, the assistant police commissioner for Calabar province, described the behavior of the crowd of women at Abak as follows:

The women were advancing very quickly leaping and jumping and screaming and yelling in a sort of frenzy and repeating some cry. The mob was solely composed of women. They had crowns of leaves on their heads and some had leaves round their waists and they were brandishing heavy bush sticks rather about the size of pick handles. Some were stripped to the waist. They were very menacing...There was no doubt in my mind that they were out for trouble that day and were absolutely savage and were out for excesses.

Women who failed to fit the image of the “good woman” or to behave in a manner conforming to British
notions of propriety were seen automatically as threatening and characterized, depending on their nubility, as prostitutes or enormous “old” women. We argue that the tendency to represent the participants of the Ogu as either prostitutes or old and obese “beldames” and “viragos” results from the antithetical relation these figures present to the iconic image of white motherhood. In alternately representing the women as prostitutes, beyond the childbearing age, grotesquely large and strong, or as massed, “frenzied mobs,” without children or clothing, colonial officers linked physical strength and the threat posed by African women, particularly by their exposed bodies, to inappropriate sexual acts and gender disorder. Thus, in British officials’ accounts of the Ogu, the participants appeared simultaneously as vehicles and symbols of inappropriate, excessive urges or behavior, notably non-reproductive, extra-marital sexuality and voraciousness.

In “More Deadly Than the Male,” Pritchard told of being attacked by a “large” woman whom he described as the “ringleader” of the crowd. Significantly, this is the only instance in the narrative in which Pritchard himself was involved in any real physical struggle and the only time he had direct contact with one of the African women. “As I tried to make my way through [the howling mob of women],” he explained,

One of the largest and most vociferous, from her manner the ringleader, jumped at me and took me by surprise. By sheer weight and impetus she forced me into the river. I emerged a very wet and enraged man and have never quite remembered how I got up that bank and through the mob, but I let go with everything I had and bull-dozed through the crowd blowing lustily on my whistle.40

This account is all the more suggestive when placed next to his testimony before the Aba Commission regarding the same incident. The Crown Counsel asked Pritchard, “On one occasion when you were landing on the bank were you attacked and pushed down?” “Yes,” he replied, “I was pushed down by the women. I was endeavouring to get back to my men, and I asked them to make way, and I was pushed down the bank.”41 Here Pritchard testified that he “was pushed down by the women,” not the “largest and most vociferous” woman. The anonymous woman probably did not push Pritchard into the river single-handedly (if at all), but this does not mean that his later account of the moment is insignificant. In this African woman, whose “enormous” and naked body stood as a visible reminder of both her sexuality and physical strength, Pritchard saw the embodiment of the threat that he experienced in his interactions with the warring women.

Violence and boundary maintenance

As we have seen, British officials in southeastern Nigeria insisted that, although the participants in the Ogu were women, their murderous intentions were plain to see and the consequences of inaction obvious. Violent force, the men claimed, was the only way to avert a general uprising in the region and to save not only themselves and the forces under their command but also the lives of the European women in residence at Opobo and elsewhere. If the British officials on the scene in southeastern Nigeria repeatedly claimed that they had no choice but to fire on the women at Abak, Utu Etim Ekpo, and Opobo in their testimony, reports, and correspondence, the notion of taking the offensive before the women could “swamp” them was the most common explanation for the shootings in each instance.

In his testimony regarding the events at Utu Etim Ekpo during the initial inquest into the shootings, the district officer for Abak, Captain Henry James, insisted that “the mobs at Utu Etim Ekpo had no fear of the troops and were making a deliberate attack with the object of swamping the troops and so disarming and destroying them. The situation was one of extreme danger to the country, as any success would in my opinion have led to a universal and frenzied rising in the District.” In his otherwise meticulous account, Lieutenant Richard Browning of the Third Battalion, Nigeria Regiment, reduced the women to an
inscrutable and savage mass, referring to them alternately as “figures,” the “mob,” and the “crowd” but never once acknowledging their sex. As an undifferentiated and uncontrollable mob, the demonstrators posed an immense threat, and, accordingly, it seemed obvious to him that when they failed to halt their approach he had no choice but to shoot. During the coroner’s initial inquest, he stated, “my platoon of 26 men was in danger of being swamped by an overwhelming mass if action was not taken at once.” Or as he explained to the Birrell Gray Commission, “had we taken a passive attitude and remained at Utu Etim Ekpo camp I think we would have been swamped…and we could have done nothing.”

To distinguish their ferocity, Browning stressed that these “mobs” were even more “demented” than the ones that he had dealt with in other parts of the empire. During his testimony before the Aba Commission, Mr. Esin, one of the African commissioners, asked, “what were the women doing? Were they merely demonstrating, or were they out for mischief?” Browning’s response was emphatic. “I am definitely certain they were out for mischief. I have seen mobs in Ireland and India, and these were certainly more riotous than any I have ever seen before. They came towards me and nothing could have stopped them.”

By contrast, according to the officials on the scene, they and their colleagues operated with “cold detachment,” and their actions were controlled and disciplined. James described the women as “utterly frenzied” and “out of control,” the antithesis of his own cool, deliberate manner in surveying the situation. Browning detailed his impressions of the same scene: “I could hear in the distance the noise of a very large and furious hostile mob…The mob was of women, waving large sticks, running, most threatening and frenzied. They appeared to be beyond control.”

The issue of control became a central motif in the accounts of British colonial and military officers, serving as a marker of difference between themselves and the Igbo and Ibibio women who confronted them. They repeatedly juxtaposed their own “cool,” “controlled” demeanor and the image of disorder before them—the “spitting,” “shrieking” crowds of “frenzied” women. In his testimony before the Birrell Gray Commission, Arthur Whitman, the district officer of Opobo, stated, “I consider the fire was well controlled …The troops exercised all reasonable caution and skill; the fire was under absolute control, there was no spasmodic firing. The soldiers were remarkably cool and they had been up all night,” while the women who confronted them “were getting into such a frenzy that they might have done anything.”

Worse still, the frenzy spread like a contagion among the indistinguishable masses of southeastern Nigeria. Tellingly, Falk employed the analogy of influenza to capture this quality of the women’s movement: “The whole thing is a disease spreading like influenza & dying down after a week…I expect that Calabar will get the fever like other places. But if the police only take the responsibility of firing a few shots (not necessarily aimed to kill) the Calabar mob will run like hares.” Against the onslaught of disease—here, a wholly imagined one since crowds of women never appeared in the port town of Calabar—Falk argued that inoculation had to be swift and decisive to be effective.

Colonial and military officers perceived and represented the participants of the Women’s War as a chaotic swarm of prostitutes and bloodthirsty “viragos;” as “harridans,” “Furies,” and a “mass of mad humanity;” and as “howling mob[s] of excited female savages” looking to “tear a man in pieces.” The language of swamping they used to describe this threat and to rationalize violence against colonial subjects was common in the years following the Great War. We see it vividly in the justifications mobilized by and for General Reginald Dyer following his actions at Amritsar in India in 1919, which culminated in the massacre at Jallianwallah Bagh, to point to the example that most readily suggested itself to colonial officials in 1929 as they contemplated what to do about the men firing on the Ohandum.

Like British officials in southeastern Nigeria, Dyer and his supporters had articulated the threat posed by the peaceful demonstration in Amritsar in images of flooding, swamping, and the breaching of tightly controlled defenses by an unstoppable force capable of sweeping away all in its path, and repeatedly contrasted the size of his troops with that of the crowd, highlighting their fears of being overcome by an
all-consuming but unrecognizable and unknowable threat. In these depictions, the “crowd” or “mob” was not comprised of discrete and distinguishable individuals of both sexes and varying in age, but appeared as an undifferentiated mass.

Just as colonial officials discounted the feminine qualities of the women in southeastern Nigeria by portraying them as bloodthirsty “Amazons” ready to “tear a man in pieces with their hands,” commentators in 1919 had gone to great lengths to demonstrate the warlike nature of the crowd at Amritsar. Both Lord Finlay and William Joynson-Hicks had insisted, in the face of clear evidence to the contrary, that no women or children had been present at Jallianwallah Bagh. Rather, Finlay had asserted, “the people were there in multitudes. It was an assembly of men, many of them criminals of the worst type, who had been engaged in the excesses” of April 10, 1919, when, as the conservative *Morning Post* reminded its readers, “a great mob, many thousand strong, was surging into the civil lines.”

“Does any one doubt,” demanded Lord Ampthill, “that if General Dyer had done less, that this vast defiant mob of rebels would have dispersed to perhaps ten different places in order to resume the work of murder, pillage and arson, which they had commenced on the previous days. His object, and his right object, was to deter them from their murderous work.” Lord Finlay declared:

If you are dealing with a formidable mob assembled in defiance of the express orders of the government, and at a time when an insurrectionary movement is in progress throughout the whole district, are you not justified, when you choose your way of putting down that insurrectionary movement, in doing it in a way which will have a beneficial effect on the restoration of order throughout the whole district? Where you have a state of things such as, unfortunately, existed in the Punjab (which really approximated to a state of war) strength is sometimes the truest mercy.

After all, the *Morning Post* explained to its readers, “his object was to disperse, not merely the meeting in the Jallianwala Bagh, but the storm of rebellion that was hourly gathering over the length and breadth of the Punjab.” “For some days there was a very real danger of the entire European population being massacred,” wrote an “Englishwoman” to *Blackwood’s Magazine*. “General Dyer’s action alone saved them.”

The use of violence against the “great mob” at Jallianwallah Bagh or, later, Consular Beach was necessary to squash rebellion *everywhere* in the colony. For colonial officials and subsequent commentators, it became an act of the “truest mercy.”

Colonial and military officials in Nigeria repeatedly invoked this imagery during the Women’s War, imagery we have argued, that was distinctive of the interwar period. It differed dramatically from the terms used to describe local resistance to the British in southeastern Nigeria before World War I. In the first decade of the century, the British had embarked on a series of military expeditions to subdue the peoples of the region. From the 1890s, the Aro Igbo had offered stiff resistance to British attempts to extend trade and European influence into the Igbo hinterland, and had earned a reputation for strength and power in greater proportion than they actually possessed. By 1900, reports of Aro slave raids and other activities disruptive of free trade and peace in the Protectorate had convinced a reluctant Colonial Office to endorse a military assault on “humanitarian grounds.” Accounts of the 1901–1902 campaign against the Aro in Igboland contained precise language about the indigenous enemies’ maneuverings, depicting them as well-organized, if fierce and tenacious, fighting units, not as an inchoate, swarming mass in which civilians and combatants were indistinguishable. Lieutenant-Colonel A. F. Montanaro wrote to High Commissioner Ralph Moor in 1902 that the “enemy had prepared elaborate entrenchments parallel to the road and stockades across it” and “retired into walled compounds” in the face of advancing troops. “On December 5th the Edda Tribe made an attack on the camp at Ekoli,” he reported, and elsewhere “the enemy...established himself in a thickly-wooded ravine...[and] for a time held the ravine tenaciously,” mounting a “a stubborn resistance.” Likewise, during the Ekumeku Rising in 1904, while officials described the Ekumeku Society as “a lawless gang of unscrupulous ruffians” and their tactics, such as destroying churches and government courthouses, releasing prisoners, and attacking or killing chiefs who
collaborated with the British as “intimidation and criminal methods,” they meticulously recorded the movements of individual bands of fighters—“a column of the enemy had passed through Issele Impatima during the previous night”; “the enemy opened fire at us,” “made several ineffectual attacks on the camp,” and “moved rapidly.” Major W. C. G. Heneker, commander of Ibebu-Olokoro Expedition in 1902, recounted examples of the cunning and skill with which his adversaries “contested every inch of the way” in detail: “the enemy opened fire from a very strong and carefully concealed sets of trenches… beautifully executed, in front of which for quite 50 yards the ground was a mass of needle-pointed stakes.” In each of these cases, the “enemy” appeared as easily discernible, individuated fighters and even as worthy opponents, nothing like the frenzied (female) mobs that threatened to “swamp” British forces in 1929.51

By contrast, the effects of daily uncertainty as well as the unprecedented and seemingly unpredictable nature of the women’s actions and appearance during the Ogu exacerbated the fears of colonial officials and intensified their sense of insecurity. We see this reaction ultimately as a product of the traumas produced by the Great War, especially as the disorders of war were articulated in the language of gender and sexual disorder in the decade following the armistice, as we saw in Chapter 3. The sexual disorders thrown up by the war and its immediate aftermath had to be managed, somehow, if normalcy and order were to be returned to postwar Britain. One way to accomplish that aim involved creating a sexual peace between men and women by re-establishing a version of separate spheres for men and women.52 But another way, especially as discontent with colonial rule rocked significant portions of the empire, was to displace onto groups regarded as “borderline figures” or “alien others” the impulses and instincts associated with sexual deviance and sexual disorder, then to eliminate those others from the imagined nation.53 We see this process at work in the debates surrounding the passage of the Aliens’ Restriction Act of 1919; in the race riots in the port towns of Britain in 1919; in British reactions to the mobilization of black troops in the Ruhr on the part of pacifists, socialists, and feminists in 1920; and in the response of the British public to the massacre of hundreds of Indian men, women, and children at Amritsar in 1919. In each of these instances, we see glimpses of what was to come in southeastern Nigeria during late 1929.

In the face of what they believed to be an inscrutable adversary, colonial and military officials in Nigeria turned to dramatic displays of violence. The British men involved in the suppression of the women’s movement in 1929, like most colonial officials, were well traveled; most of them had served in the Great War. In their testimony regarding the events of the Women’s War, the officers in the Nigeria Regiment called upon their experiences in the Great War and in other parts of the empire to justify the shootings in southeastern Nigeria. References to previous experience were most common in their defense of the use of the light machine gun, known as the Lewis gun; in several instances their rationalization relied heavily on the notion of the “moral effect” of exemplary violence.

The theory of moral effect projected a relatively benign image of colonial policing and counterinsurgency in the interwar period, in which, as Priya Satia has explained, spectacularly destructive machines replaced “the traditional ‘prestige of the white man,’” although both relied upon the putative “‘ignorance of the native mind’” for effect. During the 1920s, many British colonial and military officials came to believe that such awe-inspiring violence was not only cheaper but also more humane than the traditional “pacification” campaigns and military occupations of the prewar years because it was more precise and made a great impression on colonial populations with comparatively little loss of life.54 Lieutenant Browning, who ordered his troops to use their Lewis gun on crowds of women outside of Utu Etim Ekpo, was emblematic in justifying his actions on the basis of his experiences with “mobs” in India and Ireland. Others who made reference to the greater moral effect of machine guns cited their own exposure to the traumatic effects of mechanized warfare in the Great War. In his testimony before the Aba Commission, Captain Alfred McCullagh agreed with Browning’s assertion that the Lewis gun was not only “more humane” and “more easily controlled” but also had a greater “moral effect” on the basis of his
own experiences using the weapon in “civil action” in Ireland. “I consider the Lewis gun the better method in such case[s]…. Only one man firing, it is more humane and causes a smaller zone of fire and is more easily controlled and the moral effect is much greater than rifle fire. That is my opinion after eighteen months’ experience in Ireland.” When one commissioner suggested that the “moral effect” might be greater “if six people fire a rifle,” McCullagh insisted, “No. I have had to walk up to a machine gun, and I know!” Likewise, Colonel A. S. Ellis, the Commandant of Nigeria Regiment, declared in his response to the publication of the commission’s final report, “anyone who has himself been subjected to the fire of rifles and automatic weapons will unhesitatingly aver that the moral effect of the latter is infinitely greater than the former.” The colonial and military officers on the ground in southeastern Nigeria interpreted the Women’s War through the lens of their previous experiences—as officials in the Colonial Office would recall Amritsar when they received news of the deaths at Opobo and Utu Etim Ekpo—and justified their reaction to the women’s behavior by reference to them.  

Almost all of them veterans of the Great War and/or postwar counter-insurgency campaigns elsewhere in the empire, British officials sought to stave off the chaotic forces—in this case, racial and gendered “others”—which, they believed, threatened to sweep away the colonial order of things and themselves along with it during the Women’s War. The only option, as they stressed repeatedly in their subsequent reports and testimony, was to fire on the crowds; otherwise, as Captain James put it, “the whole country would have been up.” The forces that threatened to disintegrate, even to annihilate the subject, manifested themselves in the appearance and actions of the Nigerian women who rose up against British authorities in 1929. To process the threat, the latter drew on images from the world of the real as westerners understood it, but conjured from the realm of the pre-conscious imaginary, symbolically laden with fantastic, mythic, and monstrous women with the power to overwhelm and dissolve the vulnerable, shattered subject of the interwar period. These images posed such an overwhelming threat to the individual and collective psychic and physical survival of the British that their avatars, the women of the Ogu, had to be dispersed, if not destroyed, by the most efficient means available.

Conclusion

In the suppression of the Ogu, the British belief in the innate savagery and irrationality of the natives of southeastern Nigeria came to its bloody apotheosis. Colonial officials saw a world gone horribly awry in the crowds of women “leaping and jumping and screaming and yelling in a sort of frenzy.” In their renderings of the events of late 1929, they sutured a fantasy of “frenzied mobs” of prostitutes, “Amazons,” “beldames,” and “harridans” onto the reality of the Igbo and other southeastern Nigerian women who challenged their authority through massed, bodily displays of indigenous, female power. The intense affective power of their experiences lay in the fact that the women of the Ogu combined, however unconsciously, these portentous signs. In British eyes, both required the same response, and the simultaneous presence of one with the other only heightened the perceived threat. In other words, the transgression of European gender roles, the visible presence of female sex organs outside of the practice of normative (reproductive) sexuality, and the disintegration of the proper social order remained inextricably linked in colonial officials’ perception and understanding of the Women’s War. These images of African women—the individual “prostitute”/“virago”/“witch” and the undifferentiated “mob”—coexisted in the British narratives of the Ogu, in essence, reaffirming and sustaining one another as threatening signs and sources of danger. Intended to call attention to their unique—and now threatened—womanly role in the perpetuation of life, the women’s use of nakedness and bawdy gestures instead stripped them of their femininity (and the protections of femininity) in the eyes of British officials. The suggestion that the demonstrators at Opobo were largely prostitutes served not as a reminder that they
were, in fact, women (however debauched) but quite the opposite; it provided further evidence of the innate savagery that distanced them from any considerations accorded to virtuous others of their sex. Colored by both popular preconceptions about African women and their previous experiences of violence and chaos, colonial and military officers’ perception and understanding of the Ogu equated the presence of unclothed African women in large numbers with a levée en masse, the disintegration of the colonial order, and a mortal threat to their personal and collective existence. Paradoxically, this required a considerable imaginative leap while at the same time representing a remarkable failure of imagination on their part.

Officials’ response to the Women’s War and subsequent explanations for their actions illustrated this misreading of its causes and the participants’ intentions—indeed, of the participants themselves. These men of action and rigid control met the fluid women’s movement—which seemed to materialize and dissipate without warning and spread at an alarming rate through channels outside more conventional means of communication—with the only tactic assured of success under the circumstances, overwhelming military force. To do otherwise, they claimed, would have jeopardized the entire colonial apparatus in southeastern Nigeria. For the British, this was not only the most prudent but the most merciful course of action. Taken to its murderous conclusion, this logic, based on images of swamping, sexuality, and gender sedition, resulted in a remarkable display of colonial violence against crowds of unarmed Igbo, Ibibio, and other southeastern Nigerian women in late 1929. The aftermath of this violence would, as we shall see, have deep and lasting effects on late colonialism in Nigeria and on the evolving relationship between the British and their female, as well as male, subjects in that important colony.
In the wake of the Women’s War, British authorities in Nigeria faced the immediate problem of (re)pacifying the country and finding ways to prevent outbreaks of protests against them in the future. Women continued their demonstrations against British authority throughout 1930 even as patrols of police and soldiers took punitive action, imposed collective fines, seized property, and burned down whole villages, seeking through an extraordinary show of force both to punish wrongdoers and prevent any further attempts at resistance to British rule. Officials regarded the burning of houses as “the quickest, surest and the most humane” way of making the people see reason.” Under the Peace Preservation Ordinance, district officers and police officials utilized powers they did not ordinarily possess to act against areas thought to have participated in the Women’s War. This strategy was applied to a variety of transgressions ranging from the “sullen activity” of Africans and their hiding in the “bush,” to a delay in payment of fines, under the Collective Punishment Ordinance, levied on village inhabitants who may have had nothing to do with the disturbances. Authorities imposed exorbitant fines amounting to up to six times the annual tax assessment of a given settlement on villages, expecting them to be paid within 24 hours; failure to make the payment might result in the razing of the village. So disproportionate were the punishments meted out that the members of the second commission of inquiry protested that “the amount of burning was excessive.” British efforts, which entailed killing and wounding Igbo men and women who persisted in their protests, only brought sufficient peace to the southeastern territories that the British felt they could retract the Peace Preservation Ordinance a year later, in February 1931.1

As we have seen, the Colonial Office, fearing a repeat of the political explosion following the Amritsar massacre in India in 1919, felt compelled to react swiftly to the women’s revolt. On January 2, 1930, Governor Thomson ordered the formation of a commission of inquiry under the auspices of Major William Birrell Gray, administrator of the colony. The commission, comprised exclusively of Britons, took the testimony of 36 witnesses, virtually none of whom could be said to represent the interests of the women or even to have participated actively in the disturbances. Its report, issued on January 27, fully exonerated all of the officials, police, and soldiers involved in putting down the “riots,” finding that while the results of their actions were regrettable, their decisions had been understandable and responsible.

Colonial Office personnel recognized that such a report, cobbled together largely by the very people under investigation, would not be regarded as credible, and moved quickly to appoint a second, more representative commission. Headed by the chief justice of Nigeria, Donald Kingdon, the commission included two Nigerian barristers, Kitayi Ajasa and Eric Olowolu Moore; a representative of the commercial interests, Ronald Osborne; a government official, William Hunt; and a British lawyer, Graham Paul. The government charged the commission with discovering the precipitating causes of the Women’s War and assigning responsibility for the losses of life and property it produced. During three months of hearings, some 500 Nigerian and British witnesses gave testimony. The presence of Africans on the commission questioning British officials in what could be construed as a trial-like setting, an
unprecedented spectacle before large crowds of Nigerian peoples, rankled many members of the colonial service, but the proceedings produced an extraordinary body of evidence. The commission delivered its findings in July 1930, asserting that the “riots” had been caused by the introduction of taxation on women and by the hasty and ill-considered actions of a number of British officials once the “riots” broke out. Commission members also found that the killing of the women had been unnecessary and avoidable, casting blame on the individual officers in charge of the troops and police who had shot them down. In a separate addendum to the report, Graham Paul held that the policies of Governor Thomson, most especially the imposition of taxation before the government of Nigeria truly understood the organization and nature of Igbo society and political culture, had been the direct cause of the women’s revolt.

The Legislative Council of Nigeria met in Lagos on January 31, 1931, to debate the findings of the commission report, generating extensive coverage in the Lagos press. One African member moved that the council express regret at the loss of life suffered by the women and call for the punishment of those officers named by the commissioners. The motion set off a wave of recriminations from administrative officials and others, including missionaries, against the behavior of the women and assertions that the officials involved in their deaths could not be expected to have done any differently in the dangerous and wholly unprecedented conditions they faced. For its part, the government agreed to express its regret but not to punish the officers involved; the council as a whole accepted this solution. Lord Passfield, the colonial secretary, declined to take the matter further, and in the dispatch by which he brought proceedings to a close indicated that he did not share the belief of the commission that the officers should be censured for their actions. Passfield’s exoneration of the soldiers who fired upon and killed women at Opobo and Utu Etim Ekpo argued that “the situations with which the various officers were confronted were without precedent, so far as I can judge, I might almost say in the history of the British Empire. Disturbances in which women have taken the foremost, or the only part, are not unknown here and elsewhere in the Empire, but administrative, policy, and military officers in Nigeria could hardly anticipate demonstrations by hundreds, or even thousands, of native women...developing, in some cases at any rate, into definite attacks on the property of Government or of private individuals; and in some cases threatening life.” He could not say, given the conditions they faced, that firing was not called for. No officers were punished for their actions, though the tenures of many officials whose decision-making had contributed in some way to the outbreak of the Women’s War were cut short. District Officer Arthur Whitman, Resident Edward Falk, and, most prominently, Governor Graeme Thomson were recalled to London. Passfield had singled out Thomson for failing to gain a full appreciation of the social and political structures of the peoples of southeastern Nigeria before he imposed taxation on them. He found the governor’s policy to be “injudicious and premature.”

In commissioning the two investigations of the Women’s War, the authorities in London acted out of fear that the shooting of women would provoke an outcry similar to that evoked by the Amritsar massacre in 1919. As it turned out, they need not have worried, for no such outcry materialized in Britain. Certainly the Women’s War did not confront the British public with the slaughter of 400-odd unarmed men, women, and children who had been killed at Amritsar in 1919. But the loss of life of fifty-eight women should have sparked some outrage among the British public. Colonial officials certainly thought that it would, asserting in private correspondence that, as Governor Graeme Thomson telegraphed to Lord Passfield, “I considered that an immediate enquiry into this matter was essential in order to satisfy public opinion both here and in England.” Under-Secretary of State Drummond Shiels wrote a memo marked “Very Urgent” to his superiors about the “Nigerian Shootings,” warning that the feeling in the House and in the country will be greatly aroused over the happenings in Nigeria. ...the story does not read well and there is certain to be a strong feeling expressed that certain people have blundered, and that they are being screened by superiors. I do not say that this is true, but we shall have great difficulty in the House in explaining the killing of 35 [handwritten insert] women by rifle fire
and the drowning of 8 by being pushed into the river by what was apparently a panic stricken mob… It is a black chapter in our West African history and will be described as another Amritsar with the worst aspect that all but one of the 36 victims [number 44 has been struck through in the typescript] were women. 7

But in an apparent act of “forgetting” that parallels that of British colonial authorities in their failure to recall the Nwaobiala of 1925 as they gave testimony about the Women’s War in 1930, news of the women’s actions and their deaths at the hands of British officials seemed not to register in Britain. Initial press reports hardly mentioned the gender of the participants at all, no doubt due in part to the failure of colonial officials in Nigeria to acknowledge this distinguishing feature of the disturbances. The Times first carried a story about them on December 13, 1929, under the headline, “Native Unrest in Nigeria. Europeans Assaulted.” The entire article read:

Much unrest has developed in some parts of South-Eastern Nigeria. Trouble broke out in a village about 15 miles distant from Opobo, where a political officer was attacked, a native Court burnt down, and telegraphic communications were temporarily destroyed. A large force of police is now in the area.

Minor troubles in the nature of demonstrations have occurred at Umuahia and other places in the neighbourhood. On Tuesday demonstrations by several hundreds of native women took place in Aba itself, and they were repeated yesterday. Europeans were assaulted, the offices of Barclays Bank were rushed, two European stores were forced and partially looted, and the District Officer’s headquarters were attacked. Reinforcements of police were obtained and a small detachment of troops arrived this morning. The situation is well in hand. 8

Women’s participation in the “unrest” is mentioned in paragraph two of the story, but this mention comes relatively late, and appears to have been obscured by the information given in the first paragraph. The unusual nature of the demonstrations is also literally minimized by the use of the term “minor” to describe the demonstrations, and by the emphasis placed on the supposed assault on Europeans, which, in fact, did not take place. When next The Times reported on the events, on December 16, no mention of women was made at all. A December 19 story referred to “clashes with natives” having taken place in Opobo without designating that those natives were women, although in the section on Parliament in the same edition, the paper reproduced the statement of Shiels in reply to questions raised by two M.P.s. Shiels noted that all of the casualties at Opobo had been women, but it would have been hard to discern from his speech that the “rioters” were exclusively female. The Daily Mail, by contrast, headed its short report that day with “18 Women Shot,” telling readers that “a large crowd proceeded to loot and destroy property,” compelling the police to fire. “It is not yet known how many of the 18 women hit were killed or have died from injuries.” The following day, The Times carried another story on “The Unrest in S.E. Nigeria” in which its correspondent noted that the station at Opobo “was crowded with women,” but other sections of the text imply that it was, at the very least, a mixed crowd, and that men, not women, played the key role in the rioting. 9 The Mail reported on that same incident on December 20, 1929, failing to note that the “rioters” and “disorderly crowds” were almost exclusively female. A four sentence story in the December 21 issue of The Times reporting that the crisis seemed to have passed made no mention of women, but on December 24, Christmas Eve, readers of the paper learned more about the nature of the riots. Under the headline, “The Unrest in S.E. Nigeria. Casualties Among Native Women,” they could read:

In the early morning of December 16 the District Officer met a large mob of women armed with sticks and parleyed with them for 11/2 hours. War canoes arrived to carry off loot from the factories and men armed with machetes landed and hung around the outskirts of the mob. A rush of the mob cut off the District Officer and a small party of 12 police from the rest of the town, leaving Europeans defenceless. Fortunately, at 8 o’clock in the morning one platoon of troops under Lieutenant R. M. Hill, The Welch Regiment and Nigeria Regiment, arrived and forced its ways through the mob to join the District Officer. Parley with the mob continued, and Lieutenant Hill was hit with sticks. The mob gradually pushed back the District Officer and Lieutenant Hill until the troops had their backs to the office wall. Lieutenant Hill warned the mob more than 10 times that he would be compelled to fire unless disorder ceased, and fired his revolver as a warning.

At last, attempts were being made to snatch rifles from the troops and the District Officer was being attacked, Lieutenant Hill gave orders to fire. The rush of the mob pushed some women into the river, and eight of them drowned. Nineteen women and one man
Here, too, although it should have been clearer to the reading public that the rioters were women, it was possible to believe that they had been instigated and led by men. The explicit mention of “war canoes” in the article, indeed, signaled just this to the knowledgeable British reader, since these conveyances had achieved semi-mythical status among “old Nigeria hands” and readers of the London illustrated newspapers in the latter years of the nineteenth and the early years of the twentieth centuries. The threat of male insurrection in the coastal Nigerian southeast was regularly tied to the sudden appearance (and subsequent rapid disappearance) of such spectral vehicles throughout the years of pacification. Such sensational language was only one way, however, that the women’s actions were converted in the British media into male subterfuge. Coverage on December 29 referred to an attack on a native chief by “neighbours” that resulted in the deaths of four people and the wounding of twenty more. Only at the end of the short article, when the paper noted that “the general position of the disturbed areas has improved, and the women are returning to their villages,” would readers have learned that the “neighbours” who assaulted the chief were women. The Mail’s story was virtually identical.  

Articles pertaining to the “disturbances” in The Times on December 30 and 31, 1929, and January 8 and 30, 1930, failed to identify the “rioters” and “looters” as women. Finally, on January 31, the paper reported on the establishment of a commission of inquiry into the “unrest” in southeast Nigeria, and in the last paragraph, noted,

A feature of the disturbances was that women were the actual aggressors and were put forward, it is stated, in the belief that the authorities would not fire on them. This supposition proved incorrect. At Opobo, the British officer, after parleying with the women for hours without effect and finding that they had driven the troops to the wall of the station and were in the act of snatching the rifles from his men, ordered fire to be opened. Some 18 women were killed. Others were killed in disturbances elsewhere. In several cases the tribesmen had gathered ready to loot, when, as they expected, the women had driven the whites away.  

Colonial officials and journalists covering the story presumed the women’s participation to be auxiliary to the actions of the real agents behind the rioting, indigenous men with a criminal agenda.

Neither the Daily Herald nor the Manchester Guardian mentioned that the rioters had been women, though both reported on Shiels’ statement before parliament that women had been killed in the unrest. The Daily Mail did take a more prominent notice of the participation of women than some of its counterparts, while the Daily Worker wrote of the “massacre of African Women by the British Government” in January 1930, but, like the mainstream press, did not specify that the protesters were exclusively women. Rather, according to the communist paper, the rioters were “small peasants.” The Daily Telegraph’s single article on the riots in December did not say a word about women at all. The Woman’s Leader, a feminist paper affiliated with the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship, did not report on the riots. Only the Morning Post—under the headline “NATIVE RIOTS IN NIGERIA. A Dozen Women Shot. Troops Repel Mass Attacks”—observed that “a curious feature of the agitation was the fact that it was fomented by women, who organised mass attacks on certain small Government buildings and the treasury House.” It then went on to say that “orders were apparently given to the troops to fire over the heads of the crowds,” enabling the reader to assume that while women “fomented” the disturbances and were killed by troops trying to quell them, they did not constitute the entirety of the “mob.”  

The African World, a London weekly directed toward commercial and financial elites in both Britain and the colonies, initially carried the reports issued by Reuters, which repeated the information given out by the Colonial Office. But on January 11, 1930, it included a letter from its Lagos correspondent that sympathetically tied the rioting to women suffering from economic pressure. Buried in the fifth paragraph of a six-paragraph column, the correspondent asserted that in response to new efforts to tax the populace,
women all over the districts rose up to protest against the system of utterly impoverishing them. Banks and other mercantile houses were broken into and their books and other materials damaged. Native Courts, which have become, in popular opinion, fattening houses for chiefs, were broken into and excesses committed. Further, it must be wrong to expect illiterate women, especially when infuriated, to understand and appreciate why they pay more for what they purchase from European stores while at the same time only the lowest price is paid for produce.

Local “Old Coasters” would have caught the reference to “fattening houses for chiefs,” recognizing the gender inversion this phrase invoked. Historically, “fattening houses” served as the sites where young Igbo girls were initiated into a state that rendered them eligible to be married. In the African World’s rendition, chiefs had metaphorically taken up the social structural position of young, untried girls, effectively becoming “unmanned” by their complicity with British colonial rule. The following week, the periodical observed that “in one place no less than twenty thousand women assembled and refused to disperse, but eventually were cleared out with sticks. Subsequently they returned, and it was then necessary to fire upon them.” But the writer also tried to downplay the significance and unprecedented nature of the events, claiming that “the movement was neither political nor anti-foreign, and arose partly from a misunderstanding and partly at the instigation of some of the men.”

Press reports emanating from Nigeria later in 1930 carried more complete information about the Women’s War and gave it the significance it had received in official circles both in Nigeria and in London. A letter to The Spectator magazine of May 24, 1930, by “A Woman Correspondent”—perhaps Margaret Green or Margery Perham—explicitly referred to the unrest as a “woman’s rising” and noted its extraordinary scope and nature. She described the events of December 1929 as “the recent rising of some thousands of women out here; the first feminist movement in the modern manner, which extended over some hundreds of miles and included in an amazing way women of different districts and dialects who at ordinary times have apparently scarcely any communication with one another.”

Once the report of the second commission of inquiry, which found that the shootings of women had been unjustified, was released in August, the press became more accurate in its accounts of the riots. On August 25, 1930, The Times’ story by “a Nigerian Correspondent” asserted that

The trouble was of a nature and extent unprecedented in Nigeria. In a country where the women throughout the centuries have remained in subjection to the men, this was essentially a women’s movement, organized, developed, and carried out by the women of the country, without either the help or permission of their menfolk, though probably with their tacit sympathy. The casualties resulting from the conflicts with the armed forces of the Crown were almost entirely women. Fifty-four were killed or died of wounds, and 57 were wounded. One man was accidentally killed and another wounded. The area involved was practically the whole of the two provinces, in extent larger than the six northernmost counties of England, containing a population of 2,750,000; and apart from the large numbers of armed police, nine companies of infantry had to be drafted into the area from other parts of Nigeria to complete the pacification of the disturbed area...within three weeks of what they believed to be the first overt action by Government agents in the taxation of women numerous meetings had been held, the women’s organizations were fully operative, and tens of thousands of women were demonstrating throughout the two provinces.

The Morning Post’s account quoted a local businessman who had observed “about 12,000 native women, some of them congregating from places almost 100 miles away, invading Aba to complain to the district officer about the reported intentions of the Government to impose a direct tax on the women.” The paper reported that “the most interesting feature of the riots was the fact that they had been organised almost entirely by women in a community which was anything but a matriarchy. The men had been excluded from the meetings of the women, but they had given them their tacit support, and had accompanied them in war canoes on the occasion of their mass deputation to Aba. It was necessary to remember, however, that the women held great influence as they were largely the traders of the community.” The Daily Worker entitled its coverage of the release of the report “Massacre of 54 Armed Women,” and clearly stated that the risings in December 1929 had been the work of women who had “organised themselves in tens of thousands throughout the provinces.”
Public response to the press coverage, even when it succeeded in conveying the extraordinary nature, scope, and significance of the Women’s War, seems to have been almost non-existent. No letters to the editor appeared in the major dailies. Members of parliament restricted their questions, for the most part, to matters of information-gathering; they made no protest against the actions of the troops until January 29, 1930, when Labour MP Kedward asked Shiels “whether, during the recent disturbances in Nigeria, machine guns were used to fire upon the women in Etim Ekpo and Abak; and, if so, what action he propose[d] to take in the matter?” When Shiels replied that at Abak “shots had been fired by the police, who are not armed with machine guns, and at Utu Etim Ekpo the number of casualties was four,” Kedward appears not to have noticed Shiels’ failure to answer his question, proceeding instead to question the undersecretary of state for the colonies about the collective punishment imposed on the villages of southeast Nigeria. This latter issue seemed to exercise Kedward and other MPs far more than the shooting of the women.19 When the report of the second commission of inquiry concluded that the shootings were unjustified, Mr. Horrabin demanded to know “what action the Government proposes to take…[and] whether the recommendations of the Aba commission of inquiry into the disturbances…, particularly as regard the free pardon of certain persons, the desirability of changes in the methods of imposing taxation, and the reconsideration both of the collective fines actually imposed and of the whole subject of collective punishment, are being carried into effect?” “Can we,” he asked wryly, “have some assurance that the officers responsible for these cases are at least being removed to areas which will give their qualities rather less scope?”20

That reassurance never arrived, but its absence provoked little public comment. On January 27, 1931, as we have seen, Lord Passfield issued a dispatch to the Government of Nigeria regarding the Aba Riots and the report produced by the commissions of inquiry into them. He declined to place blame on the officers involved in the shooting of the women and took no action against them. Horrabin questioned Shiels about the decision in parliament on February 18, 1931, but offered no objection when Shiels avowed, “no ground has been found for disciplinary action against the officers commanding the detachments of troops concerned.”21 The press was silent on the decision, and no public outcry emerged, a response we can only read as part of Britain’s on-going failure to acknowledge the southeastern Nigerian women’s actions.22

The response to the Women’s War may not have provoked commentary in parliament or the mainstream British press, but it did provoke an outcry from the ranks of precisely those to whom Resident Edward Falk and his wife, Helen, erroneously attributed responsibility for the disturbances in the first place—educated Africans, pan-Africanists and anticolonial critics on both sides of the Atlantic. In early to mid-1930, the New York-based, NAACP publication The Crisis featured two pieces on the British suppression of the Women’s War. In the second, entitled “Murdering Women in Nigeria,” Nnamdi Azikiwe—then a university student in the United States and later the first president of Nigeria after independence—declared that “the shooting of unarmed women in cold blood is certainly a form of barbarism.” He elucidated the causes of the women’s movement as he understood them, citing British encroachments upon “native law and custom” regarding “communal” ownership of markets, attempts to impose a “head tax” on women, “poorly qualified political officers of the Civil service, and the lack of any chance of conference and understanding between the mass of people and the British rulers.” Azikiwe also pointed to the practice of indirect rule in southeastern Nigeria, in which, as he put it, “on the iron hand of British power is [placed] the velvet glove of a native chieftaincy,” as a deeper source of the animosity towards the colonial government that sparked the disturbances. “The press reports regarding the shooting of women by the British Government in Opobo…,” he maintained, “censored as they have been, still show a growing resentment of the native population against the colonial autocracy of Great Britain.” Unlike colonial officials in Nigeria and the Colonial Office, Azikiwe linked the Women’s War to the earlier Nwaobiala,
noting that “in 1925 a similar incident took place in Calabar, twenty-five miles from Opobo.” “If the people of Great Britain had known of the circumstances of this riot,” he argued, “the Opobo barbarity might have been prevented.” Instead, he continued, “troops were brought in with machine guns and killed twenty-nine women and one man, and wounded eight women.”

Similarly, the members of the London-based West African Students Union (WASU), the majority of whom hailed from Nigeria, decried the shootings in the pages of the organization’s journal. In a 1934 editorial under the heading of “‘Nigger’ Hunting in America and Africa,” Wàsù compared the British response to the Women’s War to the lynching of African Americans in the United States, which, the piece suggested, was “more or less encouraged by the U.S. Government.” Like Azikiwe, the African students and intellectuals in WASU attributed the women’s movement in part to their disenfranchisement and described the Ogu as a type of suffragist movement: “In Africa, ‘nigger’ hunting has theoretically ceased under the British, French and Belgian Empires,” but “about two years [sic] ago the Government of Nigeria shot down more than fifty helpless women; not for murder, not even for stealing, but for carrying on a kind of suffragette movement…British justice!”

Black activists in London, such as the Trinidadian pan-Africanists C. L. R. James and George Padmore and the Kenyan Jomo Kenyatta, connected the Ogu to a wider spectrum of struggles for colonial and black freedom, and helped keep the memory of the events of late 1929 alive among segments of the British left late into the 1930s. In 1938, Fact, a socialist monthly edited by Raymond Postgate that featured a different monograph in each issue, published James’ seminal book, A History of Negro Revolt, which was subsequently expanded and reprinted as A History of Pan-African Revolt. “This History of Negro Revolt,” James later recalled, “could be seen on all bookshops and railway stalls the month that it was published.” In a chapter on the “Old Colonies” of Africa, he devoted several pages of the slim volume to a discussion of the Women’s War. “In Nigeria,” he explained, “the crisis which began in 1929 produced the extraordinary women’s revolt in which over 50 women were killed and over 50 wounded…Thousands of women organized protest demonstrations against the Government and its chiefs and at Aba, the capital of the Eastern Province, the women who sold in the market, faced with the possibility of a tax which would destroy their small profits, organized a revolt.” “The strength and the vigor of the movement,” he continued, “were a shock to the Europeans.” James, like Azikiwe before him, also noted the dearth of reporting on the women’s movement and what they took to be a concerted effort by British officials to silence news of the violent suppression of it. “The writer is informed by Africans from Nigeria that actual happenings in Aba have been suppressed in all official reports.” During the British campaign against the Ogu, he wrote, “Martial law was proclaimed and the Governor called a meeting of the African editors in Lagos and threatened them with imprisonment if they published news of what was happening in Aba.” James also noted that some colonial officials claimed “the revolt was the work of the agents of Moscow,” but quoted a Times piece, which stated that “this was…a women’s movement, organized, developed, and carried out by women, without either the help or commission of their menfolk,” as a more accurate characterization of the facts.

The involvement of Padmore, Kenyatta, and, before his departure for the United States in 1938, James in the Independent Labour Party (ILP) forced the issue of colonial violence into discussions within the group and the pages of its publications, even as anti-fascism increasingly over-shadowed the voices of anticolonial critics in Britain. In the late 1930s, Padmore, in particular, contributed to the ILP’s New Leader with growing regularity. The journal’s “Empire Special” from April 1938 included an article by him denouncing the British response to the recent labor disturbances in the Caribbean and the suppression of prominent trade unionists and their supporters, entitled “Colonial Fascism in the West Indies,” along with a piece that mentioned the shootings in southeastern Nigeria in late 1929.

If the Ogu did not elicit a significant response in Britain beyond the circles of these black intellectuals
and activists, it did have a decided impact on the administration of Nigeria and on the lives of southeastern Nigerian people, and it helped spark a number of initiatives that had far-reaching consequences for the British Empire as a whole. The second commission of inquiry made a number of recommendations to address some of the problems it had identified as leading to the outbreak of the Women’s War; its report convinced British authorities to decide upon, in Perham’s words, “a new orientation of policy.”

Most obvious was the need to replace the system of warrant chiefs, men whom the British, wholly ignorant of the traditions and customs of southeastern Nigeria, had appointed “chiefs” in a society that did not recognize them, and whose corruption and economic depredations had generated enormous grievances against the colonial state. The 1933 Native Authority Ordinance and the 1934 Courts and Native Legislation Authority jettisoned the warrant chiefs and replaced them with institutions and offices designed to make indirect rule more consonant with “traditional” forms of authority. These initiatives had the effect of returning local rule to a much more decentralized state: “smaller and more natural groups” like village and clan courts took over the functions of governance. In some areas a village might appoint a number of chiefs, so that no single individual chief could claim sole authority.

Aware that longer term solutions could be arrived at only through an understanding of why the system of indirect rule that had proved so effective in the northern and western territories of Nigeria had failed in the southeast, colonial authorities in London and Nigeria under-took a series of investigations into the nature of Igbo social and political life. By the end of 1933, administrative officers throughout southeastern Nigeria had produced 144 “intelligence reports,” though few possessed the language skills to carry out meaningful investigations. C. K. Meek, the anthropological officer for the northern provinces of Nigeria, had been brought down to conduct his own study, though he, too, lacked the language skills that might have yielded him more significant information. Without those linguistic skills, and consistent with his position as a government official, Meek turned to the colonial authorities to find out what they wanted to know. His resulting *Law and Authority in a Nigerian Tribe, A Study in Indirect Rule*, published in 1937, provided authorities with a framework within which to place their reforms.

Having learned one lesson at least from the “disturbances” of 1929, officials clearly believed that Meek could not glean from local women the knowledge they felt they needed to implement the kind of indirect rule that would work effectively. Therefore, colonial officials turned to Sylvia Leith-Ross, something of an “old Nigeria hand,” and to Margaret Green, a trained linguist and anthropologist, both of whom received Leverhulme Research Fellowships to study the lives of Igbo women. On the basis of fieldwork conducted in the years 1934–1936, Leith-Ross published in 1939 *African Women, A Study of the Ibo of Nigeria*. The results of Green’s fieldwork, *Ibo Village Affairs*, appeared in 1947. Together, these women pioneered the anthropological study of Igbo women, participating along with Margery Perham in the initiative, undertaken by Bronislaw Malinowski, to professionalize anthropology as a science that could be rendered useful to colonial administration. Mobilizing to counter the women’s action, in other words, had necessitated the creation of a more unified sensibility among administrators of northern and southern Nigeria. The dearth of knowledge about southern Nigeria revealed by the Women’s War compelled the Colonial Office to shift from a *modus operandi* that depended on “the man on the spot” operating from intuition and his experience of “the natives” to one in which officials became dependent upon expert knowledge derived from anthropological investigation—in this special case produced by British women like Margaret Green and Sylvia Leith-Ross—as they administered their colonies.

During the interwar period, many social anthropologists in Britain, working in a discipline still in search of a professional identity, “began to look to Africa as the laboratory for their field research.” As the first chair of anthropology at the London School of Economics from 1927 to 1938, Bronislaw Malinowski had an unparalleled impact on the development of social anthropology in Britain not only through his seminars and scholarship, but also through his influence within the International Institute of
African Languages and Culture (later known as the International African Institute), created in 1926. The Institute and its journal *Africa*, which first appeared in 1928, represented a significant step towards “converting those seriously interested in Africa into an intellectual community,” and, due in large part to Malinowski’s efforts, it became an indispensable vehicle for the consolidation and professionalization of the discipline of anthropology in Britain. The Institute established a grant program funded by the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Foundation, Carnegie Foundation, and, after the Second World War, the Colonial Social Science Research Council, which funded much of the new anthropological work on Africa produced over the following two decades. By the end of the war, the creation of new sources of financial support related to the greater emphasis on colonial development had a major impact on the growth of social anthropology in Britain.\(^{32}\)

In the 1930s, the influence of experts like Perham grew and the “tropical empire” began to garner greater attention within Britain’s major educational institutions such as Oxford, Cambridge, and the LSE. These developments were linked to the rationalization of the colonial service and the professionalization of anthropology, which oriented itself, in its English form, toward the needs of a restructuring British empire as the discipline took shape in the 1930s and 1940s. Beginning in the 1930s, advocates of colonial reform and the Colonial Office drew increasingly on the methodological tools of or spoke from within the social sciences. Led by Ralph Furse, the director of recruitment and training for the colonial service from 1919 to 1948, the Colonial Office began to take a more systematic approach to colonial administration during the interwar period, creating a unified colonial service for the whole of the British empire in 1930 and instituting Tropical African Service courses at Oxford, Cambridge, and—after Furse’s reforms during World War II—the LSE. Perham, who taught in the colonial history curriculum at Oxford in 1927–1929 and 1933–1934, developed her own course on “Native Administration” in 1933–1934, most likely teaching her book of the same name, treating Nigeria, in which a discussion about the Women’s War and Lugard’s system of indirect rule held pride of place. She was elevated to the position of research lecturer in Colonial Administration, one of five new research lectureships at Oxford funded by the Rockefeller Foundation in the United States. In 1937 and 1938, Perham and Reginald Coupland organized the annual summer program for colonial officers on leave. From the late 1930s, Perham and the anthropologist Lucy Mair at the LSE pioneered the idea of a new discipline devoted to the “art and science” of colonial administration, an ill-defined program designed to meld the Lugardian ideal of the colonial officer with the methodological precision of the social scientist.\(^{33}\)

The events of late 1929 in southeastern Nigeria confronted British colonial officials with one of the earliest instances of the limitations of indirect rule, contributing to a dramatic shift in colonial policy in the 1940s—a period in which the Colonial Office assumed greater centralized control and its approach shifted from “indirect rule” and “trusteeship” to colonial development and “partnership.” A new consensus emerged among the British left, colonial experts, and reformers in the Colonial Office during the late 1930s and early 1940s around the conviction that the British empire had to be reformed in order for it to survive, while the exigencies of World War II led the British government to take the first steps toward a new colonial policy. “Before 1935,” Barbara Bush has observed, “African problems were rarely included in the political agenda of the imperial parliament and criticisms of the principles and workings of colonial rule generally went unheeded. This situation changed during the late 1930s as the growth of resistance in the colonial hinterland, combined with developments in international imperialism, refocalised Africa at the crux of debates over imperial policy.” In the years immediately preceding and during the Second World War, Africa in particular “was brought into the heart of mainstream politics in the imperial parliament.”\(^{34}\) For the conservative Lord Hailey, a senior member of the Colonial Office who was instrumental in bringing about the transformation in thinking about empire, the growth of anticolonial movements across British colonial Africa, in conjunction with labor unrest in the West
Indies, exposed the erroneous “assumptions of trusteeship,” which “failed to place on the colonial power any direct obligation to assist in the material or social development of the indigenous population.” Hailey’s comprehensive *African Surveys*, the first of which appeared in 1938, immediately superseded the extant standards—Lugard’s *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa* (1926) and the American Raymond Leslie Buell’s *Native Problem in Africa* (1928)—as the primary point of reference on colonial Africa. Though, in another incidence of the selective “forgetting” of the Ogu, Hailey failed to mention the Women’s War as a motive factor behind his thinking, the British response to it—in acknowledging the failures of indirect rule and the need to obtain more knowledge through anthropological study to address the problems that appeared to be at the heart of anticolonial movements—provided the template for subsequent British colonial actions in the face of anticolonial revolt.

Malinowski’s 1929 call for the marriage of academic social science with colonial administration—what he termed “practical anthropology”—found its very instantiation in the works produced by Leith-Ross, Perham, and Green. From them emerged administrative reforms that contributed to the larger shift in imperial policy from “indirect rule” to “partnership.” By the late 1930s and 1940s, the colonial expert increasingly supplanted the colonial man on the spot of the 1920s, who, like Wallace’s Sanders, ruled by force of personality and an almost intuitive ability to know his native charges. In this sense, the failure of the individualist and masculinist Sanders model when faced with what colonial officials truly found inexplicable—the concerted, mass movement of women’s resistance—presaged this transformation. Rather than becoming “invisible,” as Judith Van Allen once proposed, southeastern Nigerian women’s 1929 demonstrations may actually have helped to pave the way towards Nigerian and other colonies’ independence.
Conclusion

The Women’s War had both an immediate and far-reaching impact on the future administration of Nigeria.\(^1\) Its effect upon the female Igbo population is more difficult to trace. Van Allen has argued that the *Ogu Umunwaanyi* experience constituted a last-ditch effort on the part of Igbo women to salvage part of the political autonomy they enjoyed under historical Igbo political systems. She regarded the *Ogu* as a failure, ultimately, after which Igbo-speaking women slipped almost entirely out of the Nigerian political picture in the years following it. Imposed western notions about the family and gender roles effectively blocked future large-scale participation by women in local politics.\(^2\) Against Van Allen’s invisibility hypothesis, however, Mba, Akpan and Ekpo, and Chuku offer a view of Igbo and other southeastern Nigerian women continually involved in resistance to political domination and actively participating in Nigeria’s political and economic life through the mid-1960s and beyond. Van Allen thus appears to have accepted the ultimate triumph of European over Igbo values, while Mba, Akpan and Ekpo, and Chuku argued for a more synthetic solution in which local forms have not been completely displaced so much as changed by their contact with western notions.

In evaluating the success of the Women’s War, it behooves us to ask who exactly Igbo and other southeastern Nigerian women sought to resist—and, indeed, to communicate with—in late 1929. Previous scholars have singled out the women’s expressed grievances against the warrant chiefs as evidence that these colonized men were the objects of women’s demonstration, rather than the European strangers in their midst or even the colonial system. Other scholars have argued that women directly resisted the colonial administration, whose institutions rendered women and their previous roles more and more invisible. After carefully considering the evidence, we support Caroline Ifeka-Moller’s contention that women were not so much targeting any one group as they were engaged in a difficult and dangerous cosmological maneuver, trying to set their world aright by shifting the balance of all men’s relations to women.

This is not always easy to discern, for testimony before the Aba Commission could be ambiguous. Some women sought to assimilate themselves as stakeholders within the colonial apparatus. Others took a more radical stance, demanding an end to the colonial state altogether. Still others were not sure how they wanted the new dispensation to unfold. But the actions of the women involved in the *Ogu* suggest an adherence to the more radical solution: as we have interpreted their gestures, they repeatedly insisted that the colonial state and its ancillary commercial and missionary enterprises had so mutilated the land that the only way to restore equilibrium to their world was to destroy the material manifestations of British colonialism, in hopes that the actual might of the imperium would disappear along with its buildings, roads, and other artifacts.

Through this shift—which included direct contact between Igbo and other southeastern women, on the one hand, and the entire colonial establishment (African as well as European), on the other—the women sought to assimilate and reshape new socioeconomic elements on the ground in southeastern Nigeria. They looked to transform these elements from potentially life-threatening ones to ways of being that would offer respect, nourish life, and ensure continued prosperity for everyone. The women warriors felt that the changing land, although full of dangers, could be shepherded in such a way that true good (*mma*) would result and the people could not only live but thrive. This could never happen, however, if all the good flowed in one direction only, and towards only some of the many constituencies in the land. If the
land was to change, that change needed to be borne equally, by all parties. In short, these brave women did not attempt to set up a matriarchy or to impinge upon valid masculine concerns. Rather, they tried simply, to the best of their abilities, to ensure the continuance of *uwa mmadu* (the world of human beings).

The story of the *Ogu* suggests that “resistance” as a category can be too limited, and perhaps too passive, to deal with instances in which people attempt to meet social change head-on, to try to shape change and to assimilate that change in relation to a clear, pre-existing vision of the world. Resistance presupposes oppression of a particular sort and a consciousness of oppression that inevitably leads to dissatisfaction and finally to action. While Igbo women were seen as a valuable and viable part of the Igbo cosmography, while it was enough to be “useful” to ensure the good of the land, colonial oppression and resistance to masculine order did not greatly matter to them. Change could be gradually introduced into Igbo social worlds and regulated by all concerned parties in a careful manner. Igbo societies had been in constant contact, through trade and less friendly interactions, with their neighbors for centuries before the arrival of the European mercantilists and full-blown British colonialism. The adaptability of Igbo social life, its predilection for the assimilation of different ideas and new social institutions, can be seen in the wide variety of cultures in Igboland. When anthropologists got around to enumerating these between the 1920s and the 1960s, they were found to range from the strictly patrilineal northern Igbo, the Benin-influenced western Igbo with their highly developed market institutions and kingships, the matrilineal, militarized Ohaffia Igbo in the south, and the long-distance trading, double-descent reckoning Afikpo Igbo who had engaged in their own variety of colonialism before the advent of the British.

Radical, sudden change, however, could not be easily assimilated, and such change placed the foundations of even this diverse Igbo world in jeopardy. For women the activities of the newly introduced colonial system and its effects upon Igbo men proved especially problematic. So long as women’s existence had both public and private dimensions, they were “useful” and complemented men. But attempts to dismantle the public dimension of women’s lives, their “usefulness,” accordingly diminished them. Devaluing women’s abilities amounted to taking from them part of their reason to exist—in women’s terms, “killing” them as fully social human beings. Only by maintaining control over what they contributed through their productive and reproductive capacities were women able to live peacefully and see themselves as an integral component in their own social system.

The sacrifice of women’s structured social agency to the aggrandizement of the activities of men could only bode ill for Igbo cosmological balance. Because Igbo men were unable to perform the necessary female duties to Ala (the land being personified as female), the sudden dismissal of women from the institutions of Igbo economic, political, and religious life set up potentially disastrous reverberations throughout local cosmologies. The consequences of prolonged gender discord, and, by extension, conflict between the male and female principles instantiated in Chukwu and Ala, were dire: first barrenness, then death. The *Ogu Umunwaanyi* of 1929 cannot merely be seen as a failed resistance movement or as a brief moment of “visibility” for southeastern women’s culture. It represented a serious attempt to ward off cataclysmic social death—a death that might first strike women but which would surely spread to men themselves, and even beyond men to engulf the world of the ancestors and spirits, estranging all from the greatest spiritual forces. Because of this, and because Igbo cosmography now included the world of the Europeans, the women were obligated to bring warning even to the colonial government, “reminding” these strange but nonetheless human beings of their physical and spiritual danger.

The “success” of the *Ogu Umunwaanyi* in these terms is difficult to evaluate. The women did see the warrant chief system dismantled, and they never were forced to relinquish completely their place in the local markets, even though their role continued to be verbally diminished by the now widespread English designation “petty trading.” We would argue that one of the unanticipated consequences of the Women’s War was the creation of new identities among the participants in the *Ogu*. For southeastern Nigerian
women, the responsibility to reestablish the moral and material order of the universe enabled them to mobilize on the basis of a more expansive notion of womanhood. The localized Igbo practice of “sitting on a man” to express grievance was transformed, in the colonial context, into a broad-based movement that became known as *Ohandum*, translated loosely, as we have done above, to mean “the big council of all wives.”  

The concept of *Ohandum*, while technically an Igbo term, was embraced by women of other linguistic groups as the movement spread across the colonized territories of southeastern Nigeria, incorporating Ibibio-, Efik-, Ijo-, Annang-, Ogoni-, and Andoni-speaking women, among others. Becoming members of *Ohandum* enabled women across southeastern Nigeria to transcend the limits of their particular villages and locales and the administrative divisions of the colony to involve themselves in a true mass movement.

Women’s associations have not died out in southeastern Nigeria, and market associations continue to play an active role in local and national politics—although these associations are now run almost exclusively by men. Igbo women’s educational opportunities still lag behind men’s, but they are nonetheless one of the best-educated groups of women on the African continent. Because of their demonstrations, Igbo women were more closely studied by western scholars (at the behest of government) in the period directly after 1929 than were women in any other area of Africa, and women’s continued prominence in most contemporary Igbo studies seems to imply that their demonstrations did effectively gain for them the lasting attention of colonial and post-colonial administrators, politicians, and intellectuals. Perhaps most importantly to Igbo women themselves, the much-feared cosmological death did not take place. Igbo women continue to see themselves as “useful” people in the twenty-first century, and the good of the land is still their concern. If we think of the movement’s impact in these terms, then it did, indeed, enjoy some significant measure of success.

Moreover, as we have seen most recently in the incidents in the Niger Delta in 2002, the *Ogu Umunwaanyi* of 1929 established a legacy that the women of southeastern Nigeria have called upon as a model, a memory, and a method of protest. In 1933, women demonstrated against the price of palm oil and other trade goods in Oron; they resisted en masse searches conducted by British authorities to contain illegal liquor sales in 1935; and in 1944, women rioted in Ikot Ekpene and Calabar to protest the price established by the government for garri (ground and processed cassava, a starch staple). They rose against the imposition of new taxes in the 1930s and offered vociferous protestations against the establishment of oil mills in the 1940s and 1950s. The latter compelled British authorities to remind local officials in Nsulu in 1949 that “particular attention should be paid in future to the possibilities of unfavorable reaction on the part of the women and that women in addition to the Native Authorities and men should be fully consulted.”  

Certainly the British in Nigeria had not forgotten the lessons of the Women’s War of 1929; indeed, the *Ogu* would continue to serve as a precedent, whether acknowledged or unacknowledged, for the contributions Nigerian women would make to the struggles for constitutional and political liberty from Britain in the 1950s and 1960s and beyond.
Introduction

1 “Nigerian Women Threaten Naked Protest at Oil Plant,” Denver Post (July 15, 2002): 2A. These promises have not been made good; the situation, in fact, has worsened for the people of the Delta. Additional protests against oil companies in the Delta by naked women occurred as late as July 2008. See “Nigeria: Women Protest Naked; Eight Shot in Renewed Inter-Ethnic Crisis,” Vanguard (July 17, 2008): http://allafrica.com/stories/200807170572.html.

2 This kind of protest was not limited, of course, to Nigeria. Women’s protests against colonialism took place in numerous European colonies in Africa. See, for example, Marc Matera, “Anticolonial Protests,” Oxford Encyclopedia of Women in World History, ed. Bonnie G. Smith, 4 vols. (Oxford, 2007), 2: 540–543.


5 Minutes of Evidence Taken by a Commission of Inquiry Appointed to Inquire into Certain Incidents at Opobo, Abak and Uti Etim Ekpo in December, 1929, by Major William Birrell Gray, chairman (January 1930); Aba Commission of Inquiry, Notes of Evidence, Annexure II, Appendix III (14) (a), The Royal Empire Society, Received 11 March 1931, p. 5.

6 The exact number of fatalities will never be known, but most scholars estimate between forty-eight and sixty-three dead. However, some, like Emma Brown, have claimed that as many as 500 people lost their lives in the British suppression of the Women’s War. See Ekeware Otu Akpan and Violetta I. Ekpo, The Women’s War of 1929: A Popular Uprising in Southeastern Nigeria (Calabar, Nigeria, 1988), p. 43.

7 Graham Paul in Aba Commission, Notes of Evidence, p. 108. Whether Paul’s ideas were actually reflective of future British colonial policy, or even those of his fellow commissioners, would remain to be seen.


9 Caroline Ifeka-Moller first recognized this in her important 1975 article. However, her assertion that 1920s Igbo gender and sexuality were largely secularized in comparison to contemporary Ibibio practice does not seem to match the evidence. Ifeka-Moller, “Female Militancy and Colonial Revolt,” p. 139.

10 Mba, Nigerian Women Mobilized, pp. 89–90.


12 Of these three works, Bush addressed the Women’s War only briefly, and Falola devoted merely one chapter on “Gendered Violence” to the topic. Gailey, The Road to Aba; Barbara Bush, Imperialism, Race and Resistance: Africa and Britain, 1919–1945 (London, 1999); Toyin Falola, Colonialism and Violence in Nigeria (Bloomingon, 2009).

13 Aba Commission, Notes of Evidence, p. 480.

14 More accurately, the Aba Commission found that on seven occasions intentional firing was unjustified. The previous Birrell Gray Commission held that three of these shootings were justified. Of the remaining incidents, two were said to have resulted in no injuries and two were due to “misapprehension.” Our statement, thus, refers only to the three shootings that resulted in considerable casualties.

15 For useful overviews of the recent literature, see especially Catherine Hall and Sonya O. Rose, ‘Introduction: Being at Home with the


Priya Satia, Spies in Arabia. The Great War and the Cultural Foundations of Britain’s Covert Empire in the Middle East (New York, 2008), p. 12.

Neil Hertz, “Medusa’s Head: Male Hysteria under Political Pressure,” Representations 4 (Fall 1983), p. 27.


This discussion on race derives from Kim F. Hall, Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England (Ithaca, 1995).

See Susan Kingsley Kent, Aftershocks: Politics and Trauma in Britain, 1918–1931 (Basingstoke, 2009).


Chapter 1 Pre- and Early Colonial Igbo Worlds


4. See, for instance, Cole, Manuh, and Miescher, Africa After Gender?; Oyeronke Oyewumi, The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses (Minneapolis, 1997).


For an examination of Igbo women’s wifely roles, see Agbasiere, *Women in Igbo Life and Thought*.  
26 Green, *Ibo Village Affairs*, p. 211.  
29 Van Allen, “‘Abia Riots’ or Igbo ‘Women’s War’?,” p. 69.  
31 Van Allen, “‘Abia Riots’ or Igbo ‘Women’s War’?,” p. 69.  
33 We are grateful for the comments of an anonymous reviewer, who suggested this description of the colonized who became collaborators in the early twentieth century colonial project in the Nigerian southeast.  
42 “Collective Punishment Ordinance, No. 67,” 8 February 1912, National Archives, CO 657/14.  
Chapter 2  The British View: The Chaotic World of Southeastern Nigeria

1 Perham, Diaries 1, p. 13.
4 The following discussion of “torrid zones” depends upon Felicity A. Nussbaum, Torrid Zones: Maternity, Sexuality, and Empire in Eighteenth-Century Narratives (Baltimore, 1995).
8 Temple, Native Races, p. 5.
11 Perham, Lugard, Authority, p. 29.
12 Perham, Lugard, Authority, pp. 33–34.
13 Perham, Lugard, Authority, p. 30.
14 Kirk-Greene, Lugard and Amalgamation, pp. 56.
15 Lugard, Dual Mandate, p. 77.
16 Lugard, Dual Mandate, p. 78.
17 Kirk-Greene, Lugard and Amalgamation, p. 56.
18 Lugard, Dual Mandate, p. 75.
19 Perham, Lugard, Authority, p. 29.
20 Kirk-Greene, Lugard and Amalgamation, pp. 82, 69, 70, 68.
21 Kirk-Greene, Lugard and Amalgamation, p. 56.
22 Lugard, Dual Mandate, p. 75.
29 Quoted in Coombes Reinventing Africa, pp. 22, 17.
36 Tidrick, Empire and the English Character, pp. 204, 209, 207–208. This myth, of course, cannot belie the extraordinary violence with which the British “pacified” West Africa.
Chapter 3  The Twin Traumas of War and Influenza


Downes, With the Nigerians in East Africa, pp. 89, 90, 91.


Quoted in Angus Buchanan, Three Years of War in East Africa (New York, 1919), p. 199.

Subaltern, Subaltern’s War, p. 205; Robert Graves, Goodbye to All That (New York, 1960; originally published 1929), pp. 287, 268, 293; Judd, Ford Madox Ford, p. 320.


Irene Rathbone, We That Were Young (New York, 1989; originally published 1932), p. 430; Richard Aldington, Life for Life’s Sake (London, 1941), pp. 189, 188, 187; Subaltern, Subaltern’s War, p. 208; Carrington, p. 259; Gibbs, Now It Can Be Told (New York, 1920), pp. 551–552.


Quoted in Susan Kingsley Kent, Making Peace: The Reconstruction of Gender in Interwar Britain (Princeton, NJ, 1993), Ch. 2.

Quoted in Kent, Making Peace, Ch. 2.


Downes, With the Nigerians in East Africa, p. 110.

Chapter 4  The Nwaobiala of 1925


3. Aba Commission, Notes of Evidence, p. 36.


5. For instance, Meek notes that the women received a “miraculous message from Chuku (God).” As each colonial administrator was careful to note in 1925–1926, the message supposedly came from Chineke—one of the aspects of Chukwu. C. S. Meek, Law and Authority in a Nigerian Tribe (London, 1937), p. 201.

6. According to Green, Agbaja women were still talking about events of “fifteen to twenty years before, judging by the internal evidence of the stories and by the fact that one informant placed [an] episode just before the severe influenza epidemic of 1919.” Green, Ibo Village Affairs, p. 212.

7. For more on this telling evidentiary silence, see Bastian, “‘Vultures of the Marketplace.’”

8. Green, Ibo Village Affairs, p. 211.

9. The title given to the folder in the Nigerian National Archives, Enugu containing British memoranda and intelligence reports on the
11 The other deity being Chukwu, generally characterized as male. This name derives from the terms *chi ukwu* (big spiritual force).
12 See the discussion on Ala in Agbasiere, *Women in Igbo Life and Thought*, pp. 51–54.
15 Meek, *Law and Authority*, p. 290, notes that prayers were offered to Ala, as well as to Chukwu and ancestral forces, for the safe delivery of children. He also notes that a newly born child must be caught and not touch the earth. If a baby should be delivered on to the earth, it would cause pollution.
17 NNAE, Memo No. 124/M.P. 62/1925, District Officer, Onitsha.
19 Memo No. 124/M. P. 62/1925, District officer, Agwu to the Senior Resident, Onitsha.
21 For example, while Van Allen's description of the Igbo practice of “sitting on a man” informs us that women often used their pounding sticks—another domestic implement—against men who displeased them, she does not note any use of brooms. Van Allen, “‘Aba Riots,’” p. 61.
24 Memo M. P. No. 18/1926, dated 9 March 1926. In a letter to D. O. MacGregor, appended to this Memo, an Achi Native Court official, J. C. Iwenofu, added his own interpretations of some of the demands:
4. To stop giving wives [sic] to Christians.
5. All girls to be naked as in the olden times and not to trade. Any girl who offend this law to be taken to the god at Okigwe.
6. To clean the old roads and use them.
7. To stop use of cocoa yams and cassava.”
25 Quote from Milne, in Memo M. P. No. 18/1926.
28 From a letter attached to Memo No. 124/M. P. 62/1925.
29 Since colonial officials considered patriarchal control an obvious adjunct to “civilized” life, it should not surprise us to find that the only Igbo-speaking man who was quoted by name in the colonial accounts was one Chief Anozie of Ezira, who told the administration exactly what it wanted to hear in this regard. Memo No. 560/M. P. 62/1925, “Proposed Reforms By Bands of Women Dancers,” dated 14 December 1925.
30 Meek’s description of Igbo childbirth is quite compelling, although it is extremely doubtful he ever witnessed such an event. Men tended to be excluded during the last phases of labor, because it was women’s business. Allowing a European man access to this critical, female-dominated event might have itself constituted an affront. Meek, *Law and Authority*, pp. 289–292.
31 See Green, *Ibo Village Affairs*, p. 201 for an example that is as graphic as Green was capable of translating.
32 According to Agbasiere the southern Igbo term that was probably translated in this fashion by Aba Commission clerks was *nkwu la ukwa*. She also notes that the two types of tree most associated with *nkwu la ukwa* are the palm and the breadfruit. Agbasiere, *Women in Igbo Life and Thought*, p. 60.
33 Aba Commission, *Notes of Evidence*, p. 79.
34 Agbasiere, *Women in Igbo Life and Thought*, p. 60.
35 Chuku takes the phrase literally. Certainly befouling breadfruit or palm trees constituted an abomination, but we see it as metaphorical as well as literal. See Chuku, *Igbo Women and Economic Transformation*, pp. 214–219.
36 The place of mission Christianity in the monetization of African societies is often overlooked. In Bende and Okigwe divisions, however, the missions were an important channel for the accelerated use of British currency. Kalu, *Embattled Gods*, p. 52.
37 It is surely significant that older, missionized women were penalized by the Nwaobiala dancers in quite a different way: by confiscation of their property, a form of popular taxation through fines that we will see used against the warrant chiefs in 1929.
40 See Bastian, “‘Demon Superstition’” on twin births.
44 A copy of this November 3rd letter was appended to District officer MacGregor’s memo to the Senior Resident, Onitsha, dated 23 November, 1925. Memo No. 581/M. P. 62/1925.
45 For more on Igbo body arts in the early colonial period, see Herbert M. Cole and Chike Cyril Aniakor, *Igbo Arts: Community and Cosmos* (Los Angeles, 1984), pp. 34–46.
46 Young women had their own dance groups and other associations. See Cole and Aniakor, *Igbo Arts*, pp. 42–43. Even though young women did not wear cloth, their bodies were covered—but not covered in a way that made sense to the British.
Chapter 5  The Ogu Umunwaanyi

1 Ikodia of Ugbe bile in Aba Commission, Notes of Evidence, p. 81.
2 The deceased woman, who was about seventy-three years old at the time of her death, most likely would have been a young woman during the Ogu that shook the foundations of British control in the southern provinces. Agbasiere, Women in Igbo Life and Thought, p. 172.
4 See Basden, Among the Ibos of Nigeria, and Meek, Law and Authority.
5 We still lack the oral evidence that would explain why the women waited four years to move across the landscape again, but four is a highly significant number among Igbo-speaking people, particularly in reckoning time. There are four days in the ordinary Igbo week (izu) or eight days in the “big” week (izu ukwu), a week tied directly to market circulation. People also counted cowries—an important indigenous currency in the immediate precolonial and early colonial period—in multiples of four, particularly in twenties. It could be that the women gave the system four years’ grace because it is what, in English, we like to call a “round number.”
6 Aba Commission, Notes of Evidence, p. 11.
8 Gailey, The Road to Aba, p. 107.
9 Aba Commission, Notes of Evidence, p. 81.
10 Gailey, The Road to Aba, pp. 107–108.
13 See Van Allen, “Sitting on a Man,” for this kind of egwu.
14 Aba Commission, Notes of Evidence, p. 63; such claims were common in the Aba Commission testimony, for reasons that will be discussed at greater length below.
15 Aba Commission, Notes of Evidence, pp. 539–540.
16 In early colonial Igbo society, it was considered nso (abominable) for women to kill. See Green, Ibo Village Affairs, pp. 175, 213.
19 Chief Okororie of Nserim in Aba Commission, Notes of Evidence, p. 145. Considering the importance to men’s prestige of such yam displays, this was a gesture of utter contempt towards Okororie’s masculine, and not only his colonial, authority.
20 Perham, Native Administration, p. 209.
21 Quoted in Perham, Native Administration, p. 209.
22 OP20/1930, “Confidential Memo to Secretary, Southern Provinces, Enugu (17 October 1930) on ‘Women’s Movement’.”
23 See Mba, Nigerian Women Mobilized, pp. 74–75 and Martin, Palm Oil and Protest, pp. 90–113.
24 Mba, Nigerian Women Mobilized, p. 74; Martin, Palm Oil and Protest, pp. 110–111.
25 The testimony of Nwakaji of Ekweli gives us a sense of the deep distrust women had of the warrant chiefs and their connection to colonial officials: “Apart from Okugo’s case, which has been disposed of, the Chiefs generally conspired to harm or kill women. We said, ‘What is all this for? Why should the Chiefs kill us?’ They made a rule that wherever two or three women were found to be together they should be apprehended and taken to the District Officer.” Aba Commission, Notes of Evidence, p. 84.
26 See Ekejuba, “Omu Okwe!”
27 Aba Commission, Notes of Evidence, p. 58.
28 Buchi Emeketa’s novel The Bride Price (London, 1980) offers an interesting, fictional perspective on this issue. For a description of the process of bridewealth prestation (aku nwaanyi) in one southern Igbo town, see Agbasiere, Women in Igbo Life and Thought, pp. 106–113.
As noted previously, this has been demonstrated clearly in the extensive literature on the Ogu Umunwaanyi. A conspiracy would be looked upon as even worse than gendered—it reaches the heart of the great struggles of ndu (life/fertility) with onwu (death). Uchendu, *The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria*, p. 12.

Abia Commission, *Notes of Evidence*, p. 24; Nwanyeruwa’s initial testimony can be found between pp. 24–30. Abia Commission, *Notes of Evidence*, p. 254. Because of the strong bond between mothers and their children, Igbo-speaking people consider the character of the child to be tied to that of the mother. Asking Emeruwa if his mother was counted, in this insulting context, was to ask if he himself was truly alive or part of the wandering, evil dead.


She was not the only one who perceived this as a deadly threat. One of the women who first heard Nwanyeruwa’s account, and who later became one of the Ololoko women leaders, was Ikonna. Upon being questioned as to why the women became so agitated over Nwanyeruwa’s news, Ikonna stated, “If one hears that another is going to be killed, we should take some steps about it, and try to stop it.” Abia Commission, *Notes of Evidence*, p. 21.


Ogbenie of Ayaba-Ogbuolo reported to the commissioners that the palm leaves were a “sign that all women should meet and they did meet.” She also notes that the circulation of palm fronds “is an old custom, so that if certain women are in trouble they may get the assistance of other women.” Abia Commission, *Notes of Evidence*, p. 110.

Ojim seems to have gone to spend the night in the distant compound of a relative after hearing about the incident between Nwanyeruwa and Mark Emeruwa. He also reported that he pounded his own yams—quintessential women’s work in ordinary times—during the period of the women’s movement. He later had to be summoned before the Abia Commission to testify, and he kept his answers short. When asked whether he approved of the women’s household and their actions against Emeruwa, Ojim responded tersely, “I am not a woman.” See Abia Commission, *Notes of Evidence*, pp. 77–78.

Abia Commission, *Notes of Evidence*, p. 256. See also Bastian, “‘Vultures of the Marketplace.’”

Emeruwa eventually disclaimed the ability to translate the songs because he “could not understand” them, but there is more than a hint of embarrassment here, suggesting that this statement was not entirely truthful. Abia Commission, *Notes of Evidence*, p. 42.


Some warrant chiefs began to fear that women would try to take over the political process completely. For one man’s reaction to the women’s success, see Abia Commission, *Notes of Evidence*, Appendix IV.

See, for example, Captain Hill’s testimony, Abia Commission, *Notes of Evidence*, p. 9.

Quoted in Gailey, *The Road to Aba*, p. 113.

Mba’s discussion of the Ogu’s leadership is the best we have, and is based on her own interviews with women participants as well as the *Notes of Evidence*. See Mba (1982), pp. 81–87 and Oriji (2000); Abia Commission, *Notes of Evidence*, p. 132.


Abia Commission, *Notes of Evidence*, p. 49.


Green, *Ibo Village Affairs*, pp. 203, 205.
Chapter 6  The British Suppression of the Women’s War

1. Letter from Edward Morris Falk to Helen Falk (8 December 1929). Papers of Edward Morris Falk (Mss. Afr. S. 100(1)).
2. Journal entry by Helen Falk (6 December 1929). Falk Papers (Mss. Afr. S. 100(1)).
4. Letter from Edward Falk to Helen Falk (19 December 1929). Falk Papers (Mss. Afr. S. 100(1)).
5. Journal of Helen Falk (Mss. Afr. S. 100(1)).
6. Journal entry by Helen Falk (13 December 1929). Falk Papers (Mss. Afr. S. 100(1)).
7. Letter from Edward Morris Falk to Helen Falk (19 December 1929). Falk Papers (Mss. Afr. S. 100(1)).
8. Letter from Edward Morris Falk to Helen Falk (8 December 1929). Falk Papers (Mss. Afr. S. 100(1)).
9. Letter from Edward Falk to Helen Falk (19 December 1929). Falk Papers (Mss. Afr. S. 100(1)).

10. Quoted in report by F. P. Lynch, “Disturbances in Calabar province 1929 (7 April 1930), Falk Papers (Mss. Afr. S. 100(1)).
11. Letter from Edward Morris Falk to Helen Falk (8 December 1929). Falk Papers (Mss. Afr. S. 100(1)).

17. Lawrence, Report, p. 17, para. 112.

18. For example, in a telegram from December 10, Jackson wrote to Ingles, the resident at Port Harcourt, of the situation at Owerrinta: “I firmly believed that I could handle the situation, and that any show of force at that time might incite their passions from one of excitability to one of turbulence. I have at different times met mobs of men and women in far more turbulent moods, and by exercise of patience have allowed their feeling to run its course back to normal and have been able to reason and obtain very sensible explanations of their conduct. I was not alarmed or even unduly worried by the situation and hoped to be able to localize the movement on the banks of the Imo River.” Aba Commission, Notes of Evidence, p. 38, para. 105.


21. When the British officials described the supposed “ringleaders” of the Women’s War, these women were nearly always described as being exceptionally large physically. Aba Commission, Notes of Evidence, p. 506, paragraph 9591 & 500, paragraph 9485.


23. Lawrence, Report, p. 17, para. 11.


25. This added burden seemed all the more unjust to the women because the previous system of “indirect” taxation of the native population had mainly involved the use of forced (male) labor to build roads, railroads and other infrastructural projects, which facilitated British trade. Indeed, the women of the Ogu were not fooled by the colonial rhetoric surrounding these “modernizing improvements,” as they demonstrated by targeting roads and railroads in their actions. British officials merely took this as further evidence of the “savage” and “irrational” demeanor of the women.

27. Lawrence, Report, p. 3, para. 3 and p. 5, para. 7.
28. Commissioner Graham Paul then asked, “And [the clerk] was part of the defence on which you had to rely?” Butler replied, “That is so.” To say the least, this revelation casts further doubt on Butler’s contention. Aba Commission, Notes of Evidence, p. 405, para. 7672–7675.
Chapter 7  "More Deadly than the Male": The Women’s War in the British Imagination

1. Journal of Helen Falk (19 and 20 December 1929). Falk Papers (Mss. Afr. S. 1000(1)).
4. Letters from Edward Morris Falk to Helen Falk (20 and 22 December 1929). Falk Papers (Mss. Afr. S. 1000(1)).
7. See Akpan and Ekom, The Women War’s of 1929, p. 43.
10. Based the demands of the Nwaobiala dancers in 1925 and the ambivalence of women in southeastern Nigeria towards prostitution in general, as discussed in Chapter 4, it is unlikely that the women’s views on this subject were so absolute.
12. Gov. Thomson to Sec. of State Passfield (February 3, 1930), United Kingdom, Public Record Office, CO 583/169/3.
16. Lawrence, Report, p. 8, paragraph 14.
23. Hives, Ju-Ju and Justice in Nigeria, p. 120.
Chapter 8  What the Women Wrought

7. Governor Graeme Thomson telegram to Secretary of State Passfield (3 February 1930), CO 583/169/14, p. 2; CO 583/168/14, no date, but appears to be 24 or 25 December 1929.
Conclusion

1 See especially Afigbo, The Warrant Chiefs and Gailey, The Road to Abo on this topic.
3 The very fact that mechanisms were in place or could be readily constructed to address more radical change predicates against a notion of a “static” or monolithic Igbo society, or even one matching that antique political anthropological model, Edmund Leach’s “oscillating” equilibrium. See Leach, Edmund R., Political Systems of Highland Burma: A Study of Kachin Social Structure, Berg, 1973.
4 Agbasiere, Women in Igbo Life and Thought, pp. 42–43.
6 Quoted in Chuku, Igbo Women and Economic Transformation, p. 231.
7 Ekpo and Akpan, The Women’s War of 1929, p. 52.
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