

Women and Nationalism in Nigeria

The Great Upheaval: Women and Nation in Postwar Nigeria

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Studying how women navigated colonialism remains a key focus for scholars of African history. Judith Byfield's excellent book sits at the intersection of gender, identity, politics, colonialism, and nationalism. *The Great Upheaval* narrates the Abeokuta Women's Union (AWU) protest of the economic conditions in colonial Abeokuta that were exacerbated in the period of the Second World War, as well as of British indirect rule and the exclusion of women from colonial governance. Rooted in the tradition of women's movements — such as the 1929 Women's Revolt — Byfield reveals how local economic and political conditions influenced women's responses to both the British colonial system and the global economic depression during the interwar years.¹ Her ability to link women's political action to the changing political and economic change in the colonial era, while articulating other local nuances that are rarely pushed forward in scholarly discourse, is quite refreshing.

Byfield's main intervention is to refocus the story of Nigerian nationalism on regional historical developments in Abeokuta. Abeokuta's early contact with Europeans, Christian missionaries, and Western education, created a consciousness of an Egba nation and identity before the imposition of colonialism. Byfield reveals how this Egba nationalism was both gendered and eventually subsumed into the Nigerian nation as Nigeria sought independence from British colonialism. Her other important intervention is what she describes as a distinct 'rich symbolic and discursive' (4) framework through which one must understand women's political thought, the formation of women's organizing strategies, as well as the role women played in nationalist movements.

Drawing on an array of sources such as annual reports, official correspondence, minutes of council meetings, journals and newspapers, and critical reading of secondary literature, the book presents an interdisciplinary historical narrative of women's engagement with political and economic transitions and transformation in colonial Africa, and the articulation of their demands for belonging in local, regional, and national politics. The emergence of female intellectuals — such as Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, who founded the Abeokuta Women's Union to advocate for women's rights and representation of women in local governing bodies, as well as the end of unfair taxes on market women — as protest leaders did not work in isolation from the market women, who constituted the critical mass that challenged both colonial and patriarchal power. The collaboration between

¹For further examination of the 1929 Women's War see, for example: J. Van Allen, "Sitting on a man": colonialism and the lost political institutions of Igbo women', *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue Canadienne Des Études Africaines*, 6:2 (1972), 165–81; T. Falola and A. Paddock, *The Women's War of 1929: A history of anti-colonial resistance in eastern Nigeria* (Durham, NC, 2011).

Ransome-Kuti's Union and market women would make the Union one of the most important women's movements in Nigeria during the twentieth century.²

Byfield inserts the story of the AWU into the larger history of British and Egba interactions during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The complex processes of pacification of the region and the challenges of incorporating a century of intellectual articulation were redefined and solidified as Abeokuta confronted British rule and the indirect rule policy that incorporated aspects of the indigenous political system to create the Egba United Government. For Abeokuta, the British annexation of the region and the political restructuring that took place in 1898 inaugurated a period of political centralization and modernization that consolidated power under the authority of the Alake.

Yet, the modernization agenda of the British in the area was built on a long history of modernity driven by the acceptance of Western education and Christianity before the establishment of colonial rule. The collaborative hegemony between colonial powers and Christian missionaries has been well documented in Africa's encounter with Europe.³ In Abeokuta, the missionaries sought to create a society that conformed to Christian social values especially as they were concerned with 'women and marriage' (34). Abeokuta women attempted to adapt in the wake of colonialism and Christianity by drawing from indigenous political traditions including the exercise of female autonomy in economic activities. The unique ways women responded to these changes reveal the critical impact of historical memory in the women's articulation and framing of the social movement that emerged in the region as they sought to find their voice within political transformations prompted by British interventions.

Byfield extends the fluid and changing nature of local discourse on nationhood, race, and identity, through the political and economic upheavals of the interwar years, which saw the formation of political associations such as the Nigeria Youth Movement, the first nationalist organization to cut across ethnic lines (founded in 1934) and an African response to the Italian invasion of Ethiopia. The global context of the interwar years shaped local politics and Abeokuta, national politics took precedence, forcing the Egba sense of identity to be subsumed into national politics and nationalism of the period. Byfield draws attention to the political, economic, and social conditions of the interwar years and their role in shaping politics at the national and local levels.

While the war did not occur locally, the people of Abeokuta felt its impact, as did ordinary people across Nigeria. In particular, AWU responded to the economic control that the British authorities imposed on the local economy. Women used the demand for tax and the economic crisis in wartime Abeokuta to articulate the demand for other matters of interest to women, including political representation. The British, like other colonial powers, made enormous demands on African societies. Nigeria, a critical part of Britain's colonial empire, felt the impact of the war. Nigerians in every part of the country, as those in Abeokuta did, offered moral support to Britain, produced needed agricultural and mineral products, entered the army as soldiers, and provided the labor needed in several other areas.⁴ While the focus of this book is Abeokuta, it is apparent that wartime regulations, restrictions, food, rationing, and supplies affected the everyday life of all Nigerians at home.

The end of the Second World War did not bring economic relief, however. Byfield focuses on events between 1945 and 1947, which culminated in mass women's protests in Abeokuta at the end of 1947. The postwar years, as Byfield reveals, witnessed continued economic crises. Byfield demonstrates that the 1947 AWU tax protest that resulted was a defining moment in Egba politics. Under the leadership of Ransome-Kuti, the AWU began a protracted protest against a tax increase. The 'local government's refusal to take into account women's social and economic circumstances as it created the tax bill and the futility of the women's effort to appeal the proper channels' (185) created the conditions for the protest. Abeokuta women drew inspiration from the iconic and

² See C. Johnson-Odim, *For Women and the Nation: Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti of Nigeria* (Urbana-Champaign, 1997).

³ C. J. Korieh and R. C. Njoku, *Missions, States, and European Expansion in Africa* (New York, 2007).

⁴ For more on the contributions of Nigeria to British War effort, see C. J. Korieh, *Nigeria and World War Two: Colonialism, Empire and Global Conflict* (Cambridge, 2020).

inspirational figure of the early women's social movement — Madam Efunroye Tinubu (1805–87), a business tycoon and a powerful political voice in Abeokuta and Lagos. The memory of Tinubu became a symbol of the social movement during the Abeokuta tax revolts. For the women who led the revolts of the new era, the past inspired and provided symbolic validation to the women's social movements. Critical to a broader understanding of women's place in colonial change, as in the case of Abeokuta, is how three elements of the new political formations — the AWU, the traditional authorities represented by the Alake Ademola, and the Egba Central Council — dealt with the crisis and tensions that developed in Egba society because of the taxation of women.

The book is excellently researched and written, and is an outstanding contribution to the history and understanding of the gendered nature of social movements in colonial Nigeria. It demonstrates how women negotiated the colonial encounter and the patriarchal structures of both the colonial state and indigenous politics. Yet, the book would benefit from a regional/national approach that helps the readers understand the local and transnational ways people forged ideas and interpreted the changes they confronted and how the conditions developing in Abeokuta occurred elsewhere and were often forged by the same factors. The Great Upheaval centralized women's political engagement and activism in colonial Nigeria and the changing political landscape of the 1950s, particularly women's activism that resulted from the distinctive political moment in Abeokuta. The book ties several themes including politics, ethnic identity, gender, and women's social movement into an easily accessible and readable book.

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Racism, Study, and Cold War Solidarities

African Students in East Germany, 1949–1975

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Sara Pugach's *African Students in East Germany* recounts the educational migration of thousands of young Africans to attend universities and other institutions of higher learning in socialist East Germany. Focusing on the 1950s and 1960s, Pugach bridges various fields, including postwar histories of Germany and Africa, transnational histories of migration, and the overlapping dynamics of Cold War competition and decolonization. While there is a growing body of articles and book chapters on African student migration to communist-ruled countries, Pugach's account is among the first monographs on the subject.¹

¹Recent monographs on African students and (worker-)trainees in state-socialist Eastern Europe include M. C. Schenck, *Remembering African Labor Migration to the Second World. Socialist Mobilities between Angola, Mozambique, and East*