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Source: *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue Canadienne des Études Africaines*, Vol. 6, No. 2, Special Issue: The Roles of African Women: Past, Present and Future (1972), pp. 165-181

Published by: Canadian Association of African Studies

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/484197>

Accessed: 26/02/2009 10:17

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"Sitting on a Man" : Colonialism and the Lost Political Institutions of Igbo Women ¹

JUDITH VAN ALLEN *

In the conventional wisdom, Western influence has "emancipated" African women — through the weakening of kinship bonds and the provision of "free choice" in Christian monogamous marriage, the suppression of "barbarous" practices, the opening of schools, the introduction of modern medicine and hygiene, and, sometimes, of female suffrage.

But Westernization is not an unmixed blessing. The experience of Igbo women under British colonialism shows that Western influence can sometimes weaken or destroy women's traditional autonomy and power without providing modern forms of autonomy or power in exchange. Igbo women had a significant role in traditional political life. As individuals, they participated in village meetings with men. But their real political power was based on the solidarity of women, as expressed in their own political institutions — their "meetings" (*mikiri* or *mitiri*), their market networks, their kinship groups, and their right to use strikes, boycotts and force to effect their decisions.

British colonial officers and missionaries, both men and women, generally failed to see the political roles and the political power of Igbo women. The actions of administrators weakened and in some cases destroyed women's bases of strength. Since they did not appreciate women's political institutions, they made no efforts to ensure women's participation in the modern institutions they were trying to foster.

Igbo women haven't taken leadership roles in modern local government, nationalist movements and national government and what roles they *have* played have not been investigated by scholars. The purpose in describing their *traditional* political institutions and source of power is to raise the question of *why* these women have been "invisible" historically, even though they forced the colonial authorities to pay attention to them briefly. We suggest that the dominant view among British colonial officers and missionaries was that politics was a man's

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1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Annual Meeting of The African Studies Association, Denver, Colorado, November, 1971.

concern. Socialized in Victorian England, they had internalized a set of values and attitudes about what they considered to be the natural and proper role of women that supported this belief. We suggest further that this assumption about men and politics has had a great deal to do with the fact that no one has even asked, "Whatever happened to Igbo women's organizations?" even though all the evidence needed to justify the question has been available for 30 years.

*Igbo Traditional Political Institutions*²

Political power in Igbo society was *diffuse*. There were no specialized bodies or offices in which legitimate power was vested, and no person, regardless of his status or ritual position, had the authority to issue *commands* which others had an obligation to obey. In line with this diffusion of authority, the right to enforce decisions was also diffuse: there was no "state" that held a monopoly of legitimate force, and the use of force to protect one's interests or to see that a group decision was carried out was considered legitimate for individuals and groups. In the simplest terms, the British tried to create specialized political institutions which commanded authority and monopolized force. In doing so they took into account, eventually, Igbo political institutions dominated by men but ignored those of the women. Thus, women were shut out from political power.

The Igbo lived traditionally in semi-autonomous villages, which consisted of the scattered compounds of 75 or so patri-kinsmen; related villages formed "village-groups" which came together for limited ritual and jural purposes. Villages commonly contained several hundred people; but size varied, and in the more densely populated areas there were "village-groups" with more than

2. The Igbo-speaking peoples are heterogeneous and can only be termed a "tribe" on the basis of a common language and a contiguous territory. They were the dominant group in southeastern Nigeria, during the colonial period numbering more than three million according to the 1931 census. The Igbo in Owerri and Calabar Provinces, the two southernmost provinces, were relatively homogeneous politically, and it is their political institutions which are discussed here. Studies in depth were done of the Igbo only in the 1930s, but traditional political institutions survived "underneath" the native administration, although weakened more in some areas than in others. There were also many informants who remembered life in the pre-colonial days. The picture of Igbo society drawn here is based on reports by two Englishwomen, Leith-Ross and Green, who had a particular interest in Igbo women; the work of a government anthropological officer, Meek; a brief report by Harris, and the work of educated Igbo describing their own society, Uchendu and Onwuteaka. See M. M. GREEN, *Igbo Village Affairs* (London: Frank Cass & Co., Ltd., 1947; page citations to paperback edition, New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1964); J. S. HARRIS, "The Position of Women in a Nigerian Society", *Transactions of the New York Academy of Sciences*, Series II, Vol. 2, No. 5, 1940; Sylvia LEITH-ROSS, *African Women* (London: Faber and Faber, 1939); C. K. MEEK, *Law and Authority in a Nigerian Tribe* (London: Oxford University Press, 1957, orig. publ. 1937); J. C. ONWUTEAKA, "The Aba Riot of 1929 and its Relation to the System of Indirect Rule", *The Nigerian Journal of Economic and Social Studies*, November 1965; Victor C. UCHENDU, *The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965).

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5,000 members³. Disputes at all the levels above the compound were settled by group discussion until mutual agreement was reached.⁴

The main Igbo political institution seems to have been the village assembly, a gathering of all adults in the village who chose to attend. Any adult who had something to say on the matter under discussion was entitled to speak — as long as he *or she* said something the others considered worth listening to ; as the Igbo say, "a case forbids no one."⁵

Matters dealt with in the village assembly were those of concern to all — either common problems for which collective action was appropriate ("How can we make our market 'bigger' than the other villages' markets?") or conflicts which threatened the unity of the village.⁶

Decisions agreed on by the village assembly did not have the force of law in our terms, however. Even after decisions had been reached, social pressure based on consensus and the ability of individuals and groups to enforce decisions in their favour played a major part in giving the force of law to decisions. As Green⁷ put it :

(O)ne had the impression . . . that laws only establish themselves by degrees and then only in so far as they gain general acceptance. A law does not either exist or not exist : rather it goes through a process of establishing itself by common consent or of being shelved by a series of quiet evasions.

Persuasion about the rightness of a particular course of action in terms of tradition was of primary importance in assuring its acceptance and the leaders were people who had the ability to persuade.

The mode of political discourse was that of proverb, parable and metaphor drawn from the body of Igbo tradition.⁸ The needed political knowledge was accessible to the average man or woman ,since all Igbo were reared with these proverbs and parables. Influential speech was the creative and skillful use of tradition to assure others that a certain course of action was both a wise and right thing to do. The accessibility of this knowledge is indicated by an Igbo proverb : "If you tell a proverb to a fool, he will ask you its meaning."

The leaders of Igbo society were men and women who combined wealth and generosity with "mouth" — the ability to speak well. Age combined with

3. Daryll FORDE and G. I. JONES, *The Ibo- and Ibibio-Speaking Peoples of South-Eastern Nigeria* (London : International African Institute, 1950), p. 39 ; J. S. HARRIS, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

4. Victor C. UCHENDU, *op. cit.*, pp. 41-44.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 41 ; M. M. GREEN, *op. cit.*, pp. 78-79.

6. J. S. HARRIS, *op. cit.*, pp. 142-43 ; Victor C. UCHENDU, *op. cit.*, pp. 34, 42-43.

7. M. M. GREEN, *op. cit.*, p. 137.

8. The sources for this description are Uchendu and personal conversations with an Igbo born in Umu-Domi village of Onicha clan in Afikpo division who, however, went to mission schools from the age of seven and speaks Union Igbo rather than his village dialect.

wisdom brought respect but age alone carried little influence. The senior elders who were ritual heads of their lineages were very likely to have considerable influence, but they would not have achieved these positions in the first place if they had not been considered to have good sense and good character.⁹ Wealth in itself was no guarantee of influence: a "big man" or "big woman" was not necessarily a wealthy person, but one who had shown skill and generosity in helping other individuals and, especially, the community.¹⁰

Men owned the most profitable crops such as palm oil, received the bulk of the money from bridewealth, and, if compound heads, presents from the members. Through the patrilineage, they controlled the land, which they could lease to non-kinsmen or to women for a good profit. Men also did most of the long-distance trading which gave higher profit than local and regional trading which was almost entirely in women's hands.¹¹

Women were entitled to sell the surplus of their own crops and the palm kernels which were their share of the palm produce. They might also sell prepared foods or the products of special skills, for instance, processed salt, pots and baskets. They pocketed the entire profit, but their relatively lower profit levels kept them disadvantaged relative to the men in acquiring titles and prestige.¹²

For women as well as for men, status was largely achieved, not ascribed. A woman's status was determined more by *her own achievements* than by the achievements of her husband. The resources available to men were greater, however; so that while a woman might rank higher among women than her husband did among men, very few women could acquire the highest titles, a major source of prestige.¹³

At village assemblies men were more likely to speak than were women; women more often spoke only on matters of direct concern to them.¹⁴ Title-holders took leading parts in discussion, and were more likely to take part in "consultation." After a case had been thoroughly discussed, a few men retired in order to come to a decision. A spokesman then announced the decision, which could be accepted or rejected by the assembly.¹⁵

Apparently no rule forbade women to participate in consultations but they were invited to do so only rarely. The invited women were older women, for while younger men might have the wealth to acquire the higher titles and thus

9. Victor C. UCHENDU, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 34; C. K. MEEK, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

11. M. M. GREEN, *op. cit.*, pp. 32-42.

12. Sylvia LEITH-ROSS, *op. cit.*, pp. 90-92, 138-39, 143.

13. C. K. MEEK, *op. cit.*, p. 203; Victor C. UCHENDU, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

14. M. M. GREEN, *op. cit.*, p. 169.

15. Victor C. UCHENDU, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

make up in talent what they lacked in age, younger women could not acquire the needed wealth quickly enough to be eligible.¹⁶

Women, therefore, came second to men in power and influence. While status and the political influence it could bring were achieved and there were no formal limits to women's political power, men through their ascriptive status (members of the patrilineage) acquired wealth which gave them a head start and a life-long advantage over women. The Igbo say that "a child who washes his hands clean deserves to eat with his elders."¹⁷ But at birth some children were given water and some were not.

Women's Political Institutions

Since political authority was diffuse, the settling of disputes, discussions about how to improve the village or its market, or any other problems of general concern were brought up at various gatherings such as funerals, meetings of kinsmen to discuss burial rituals, and the marketplace, gatherings whose ostensible purpose was not political discussion.¹⁸

The women's base of political power lay in their own gatherings. Since Igbo society was patrilocal and villages were exogamous, adult women resident in a village would almost all be wives, and others were divorced or widowed "daughters of the village" who had returned home to live. Women generally attended age-set gatherings (*ogbo*) in their natal villages, performed various ritual functions, and helped to settle disputes among their "brothers."¹⁹ But the gatherings which performed the major role in self-rule among women and which articulated women's interests *as opposed to* those of men were the village-wide gatherings of all adult women resident in a village which under colonialism came to be called *mikiri* or *mitiri* (from "meeting").²⁰

Mikiri were held whenever there was a need.²¹ In *mikiri* the same processes of discussion and consultation were used as in the village assembly. There were no official leaders; as in the village, women of wealth and generosity who could speak well took leading roles. Decisions appear often to have been announced informally by wives telling their husbands. If the need arose, spokeswomen — to contact the men, or women in other villages — were chosen through general discussion. If the announcement of decisions and persuasion were not sufficient for their implementation, women could take direct action to enforce their decisions and protect their interests.²²

16. C. K. MEEK, *op. cit.*, p. 203.

17. Victor C. UCHENDU, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

18. C. K. MEEK, *op. cit.*, p. 125; M. M. GREEN, *op. cit.*, pp. 132-38.

19. M. M. GREEN, *op. cit.*, pp. 217-32.

20. Sylvia LEITH-ROSS, *op. cit.*, pp. 106-08.

21. M. M. GREEN, *op. cit.*, pp. 178-216.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 180; Sylvia LEITH-ROSS, *op. cit.*, pp. 106-107.

Mikiri provided women with a forum in which to develop their political talents among a more egalitarian group than the village assembly. In *mikiri*, women could discuss their particular interests as traders, farmers, wives and mothers. These interests often were opposed to those of the men, and where individually women couldn't compete with men, collectively they could often hold their own.

One of the *mikiri*'s most important functions was that of a market association, to promote and regulate the major activity of women: trading. At these discussions prices were set, rules established about market attendance, and fines fixed for those who violated the rules or who didn't contribute to market rituals. Rules were also made which applied to men. For instance, rowdy behavior on the part of young men was forbidden. Husbands and elders were asked to control the young men. If their requests were ignored, the women would handle the matter by launching a boycott or a strike to force the men to police themselves or they might decide to "sit on" the individual offender.²³

"Sitting on a man" or a woman, boycotts and strikes were the women's main weapons. To "sit on" or "make war on" a man involved gathering at his compound, sometimes late at night, dancing, singing scurrilous songs which detailed the women's grievances against him and often called his manhood into question, banging on his hut with the pestles women used for pounding yams, and perhaps demolishing his hut or plastering it with mud and roughing him up a bit. A man might be sanctioned in this way for mistreating his wife, for violating the women's market rules, or for letting his cows eat the women's crops. The women would stay at his hut throughout the day, and late into the night, if necessary, until he repented and promised to mend his ways.²⁴ Although this could hardly have been a pleasant experience for the offending man, it was considered legitimate and no man would consider intervening.

In tackling men as a group, women used boycotts and strikes. Harris describes a case in which, after repeated requests by the women for the paths to the market to be cleared (a male responsibility), all the women refused to cook for their husbands until the request was carried out.²⁵ For this boycott to be effective, *all* women had to cooperate so that men could not go and eat with their brothers. Another time the men of a village decided that the women should stop trading at the more distant markets from which they did not return until late at night because the men feared that the women were having sexual relations with men in those towns. The women, however, refused to comply since opportunity to buy in one market and sell in another was basic to profit-making. Threats of collective retaliation were enough to make the men capitulate.

23. J. S. HARRIS, *op. cit.*, pp. 146-47.

24. *Ibid.*, pp. 146-48; M. M. GREEN, *op. cit.*, pp. 196-97; Sylvia LEITH-ROSS, *op. cit.*, p. 109.

25. J. S. HARRIS, *op. cit.*, pp. 146-147.

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As farmers, women's interests conflicted with those of the men as owners of much of the larger livestock — cows, pigs, goats and sheep. The men's crop, yams, had a short season and was then dug up and stored, after which the men tended to be careless about keeping their livestock out of the women's crops. Green reports a case in which the women of a village swore an oath that if any woman killed a cow or other domestic animal on her farm the others would stand by her.²⁶

A woman could also bring complaints about her husband to the *mikiri*. If most of the women agreed that the husband was at fault, they would collectively support her. They might send spokeswomen to tell the husband to apologize and to give her a present, and, if he was recalcitrant they might "sit on" him. They might also act to protect a right of wives. Harris describes a case of women's solidarity to maintain sexual freedom :

The men . . . were very angry because their wives were openly having relations with their lovers. The men . . . met and passed a law to the effect that every woman . . . should renounce her lover and present a goat to her husband as a token of repentance . . . The women held . . . secret meetings and, a few mornings later, they went to a neighboring [village], leaving all but suckling children behind them . . . [The men] endured it for a day and a half and then they went to the women and begged their return . . . [T]he men gave [the women] one goat and apologized informally and formally.²⁷

Thus through *mikiri* women acted to force a resolution of their individual and collective grievances.

Colonial Penetration

Into this system of diffuse authority, fluid and informal leadership, shared rights of enforcement, and a more or less stable balance of male and female power, the British tried to introduce ideas of "native administration" derived from colonial experience with chiefs and emirs in northern Nigeria. Southern Nigeria was declared a protectorate in 1900, but it was ten years before the conquest was effective. As colonial power was established in what the British perceived as a situation of "ordered anarchy," Igboland was divided into Native Court Areas which violated the autonomy of villages by lumping many unrelated villages into each court area. British District Officers were to preside over the courts, but were not always present as there were more courts than officers. The Igbo membership was formed by choosing from each village a "representative" who was given a warrant of office. These Warrant Chiefs were also constituted the Native Authority. They were required to see that the orders of the District Officers were executed

26. M. M. GREEN, *op. cit.*, pp. 210-11.

27. J. S. HARRIS, *op. cit.*, pp. 146-47.

in their own villages and were the only link between the colonial power and the people.²⁸

It was a violation of Igbo concepts to have one man represent the village in the first place and more of a violation that he should give orders to everyone else. The people obeyed the Warrant Chief when they had to, since British power backed him up. In some places Warrant Chiefs were lineage heads or wealthy men who were already leaders in the village. But in many places they were simply ambitious, opportunistic young men who put themselves forward as friends of the conquerors. Even the relatively less corrupt Warrant Chief was still, more than anything else, an agent of the British.²⁹

The people avoided using Native Courts when they could do so. But Warrant Chiefs could force cases into the Native Courts and could fine people for infractions of rules. By having the ear of the British, the Warrant Chief could himself violate traditions and even British rules, and get away with it since his version would be believed.³⁰

Women suffered particularly under the arbitrary rule of Warrant Chiefs, who were reported as having taken women to marry without conforming to the customary process, which included the woman's right to refuse a particular suitor. They also helped themselves to the women's agricultural produce, and to their domestic animals.³¹

Recommendations for reform of the system were made almost from its inception both by junior officers in the field and by senior officers sent out from headquarters to investigate. But no real improvements were made.³²

Aba and The Women's War

The Native Administration in the years before 1929 took little account of either men's or women's political institutions. In 1929, women in southern Igboland became convinced that they were to be taxed by the British. This fear on top of their resentment of the Warrant Chiefs led to what the British called the Aba Riots, and the Igbo, the Women's War. The rebellion provides perhaps the most striking example of British blindness to the political institutions of Igbo women. The women, "invisible" to the British as they laid their plans for Native Ad-

28. Daryll FORDE, "Justice and Judgment among the Southern Ibo under Colonial Rule", unpublished paper prepared for Interdisciplinary Colloquium in African Studies, University of California, Los Angeles, pp. 9-13.

29. *Ibid.*, pp. 9-13 ; J. C. ANENE, *Southern Nigeria in Transition, 1885-1906* (New York : The Cambridge University Press, 1967), p. 259 ; C. K. MEEK, *op. cit.*, pp. 328-30.

30. Daryll FORDE, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

31. J. C. ONWUTEAKA, *op. cit.*, p. 274.

32. C. K. MEEK, *op. cit.*, pp. 329-30 ; Harry A. GAILEY, *The Road to Aba* (New York : New York University Press, 1970), pp. 66-74.

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ministration, suddenly became highly visible for a few months, but as soon as they quieted down, they were once again ignored, and the reforms made in Native Administration took no account of them politically.³³

In 1925 Igbo men paid taxes, although during the census count on which the tax was based the British had denied that there was to be any taxation. Taxes were collected without too much trouble. By 1929, the prices for palm products had fallen, however, and the taxes, set at 1925 levels, were an increasingly resented burden.³⁴ In the midst of this resentment, an overzealous Assistant District Officer in Owerri Province decided to update the census registers by recounting households and household property, which belonged to women. Understandably, the women did not believe his assurances that new taxes were not to be invoked. They sent messages through the market and kinship networks to other villages and called a *mikiri* to decide what to do.

In the Oloko Native Court area of Owerri Province, the women decided that as long as only men were approached in a compound and asked for information, the women would do nothing. They wanted clear evidence that they were to be taxed before they acted.³⁵ If any woman was approached, she was to raise the alarm and they would meet to discuss retaliation.

On November 23, the agent of the Oloko Warrant Chief, Okugo, entered a compound and told a married women, Nwanyeruwa, to count her goats and sheep. She retorted angrily, "Was your mother counted?" Thereupon "they closed, seizing each other by the throat."³⁶ Nwanyeruwa's report to the Oloko women convinced them that they were to be taxed. Messengers were sent to neighboring areas. Women streamed into Oloko from all over Owerri Province. They massed in protest at the district office and after several days of protest meetings succeeded in obtaining written assurances that they were not to be taxed, and in getting Okugo arrested. Subsequently he was tried and convicted of physically assaulting women and of spreading news likely to cause alarm. He was sentenced to two years' imprisonment.³⁷

33. Information on the Women's War is derived mainly from Gailey and Perham, who based their descriptions on the reports of the two Commissions of Enquiry, issued as Sessional Papers of the Nigerian Legislative Council, Nos. 12 and 28 of 1930, and the Minutes of Evidence issued with the latter. Gailey also used the early 1930's Intelligence Reports of political officers. Meek and Afigbo also provide quotations from the reports, which were not, unfortunately, available to me in full. See Margery PERHAM, *Native Administration in Nigeria* (London: Oxford University Press, 1937); Idem, *Lugard: The Years of Adventure, 1858-1898* (London: Collins, 1956); Idem, *Lugard: The Years of Authority, 1898-1945* (London: Collins, 1960); A. E. AFIGBO, "Igbo Village Affairs", *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, 4: 1, December 1967.

34. Harry A. GAILEY, *op. cit.*, pp. 94-95; C. K. MEEK, *op. cit.*, pp. 330-31.

35. Harry A. GAILEY, *op. cit.*, pp. 107-08.

36. Margery PERHAM, *Native Administration in Nigeria*, *op. cit.*, p. 207.

37. Harry A. GAILEY, *op. cit.*, pp. 108-13.

News of this victory spread rapidly through the market *mikiri* network, and women in 16 Native Court areas attempted to get rid of their Warrant Chiefs as well as the Native Administration itself. Tens of thousands of women became involved, generally using the same traditional tactics, though not with the same results as in Oloko. In each Native Court area, the women marched on Native Administration centers and demanded the Warrant Chiefs' caps of office and assurances that they would not be taxed. In some areas the District Officers assured the women to their satisfaction that they were not to be taxed and the women dispersed without further incident. But the British in general stood behind the Warrant Chiefs; at that point they interpreted the women's rebellion as motivated solely by fear of taxation, and Oloko was the only area in which a Warrant Chief had directly provoked the women's fears of taxation by counting their property.

Women in most areas did not get full satisfaction from the British, and, further, some British district officers simply panicked when faced by masses of angry women and acted in ways which made negotiation impossible.

In most of the Native Court areas affected, women took matters into their own hands — they "sat on" Warrant Chiefs and burned Native Court buildings, and, in some cases, released prisoners from jail. Among the buildings burned were those at Aba, a major administrative center from which the British name for the rebellion is derived. Large numbers of police and soldiers, and on one occasion Boy Scouts, were called in to quell the "disturbances." On two occasions, clashes between the women and the troops left more than 50 women dead and 50 wounded from gunfire. The lives taken were those of women only — no men, Igbo or British, were even seriously injured. The cost of property damage — estimated at more than £ 60,000, was paid for by the Igbo, who were heavily taxed to pay for rebuilding the Native Administration centers.³⁸

The rebellion lasted about a month. By late December, "order" was somewhat restored but sporadic disturbances and occupation by government troops continued into 1930. In all, the rebellion extended over an area of six thousand square miles, all of Owerri and Calabar Provinces, containing about two million people.³⁹

The British generally saw the rebellion as "irrational" and called it a series of "riots." They discovered that the market network had been used to spread the rumor of taxation, but they did not inquire further into the concerted action of the women, the grassroots leadership, the agreement on demands, or even into the fact that thousands of women showed up at native administration centers dressed in the same unusual way: wearing short loincloths, their faces smeared

38. S. O. ESIKE, "The Aba Riots of 1929", *African Historian*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (1965): 13; J. S. HARRIS, *op. cit.*, p. 143; Margery PERHAM, *Native Administration in Nigeria*, *op. cit.*, pp. 209-12.

39. Harry A. GALEY, *op. cit.*, p. 137; Margery PERHAM, *Native Administration in Nigeria*, *op. cit.*, pp. 209-12.

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with charcoal or ashes, their heads bound with young ferns, and in their hands carrying sticks wreathed with young palms.⁴⁰

In exonerating the soldiers who fired on the women, a Commission of Enquiry spoke of the "savage passions" of the "mobs," and one military officer told the Commission that "he had never seen crowds in such a state of frenzy." Yet these "frenzied mobs" injured no one seriously, which the British found "surprising."⁴¹

It is not surprising if the Women's War is seen as the traditional practice of "sitting on a man," only on a larger scale. Decisions were made in *mikiri* to respond to a situation in which women were acutely wronged by the Warrant Chiefs' corruption and by the taxes they believed to be forthcoming. Spokeswomen were chosen to present their demands for the removal of the Warrant Chiefs and women followed their leadership, on several occasions sitting down to wait for negotiations or agreeing to disperse or to turn in Warrant Chiefs' caps.⁴² Traditional dress, rituals and "weapons" for "sitting on" were used: the head wreathed with young ferns symbolized war, and sticks, bound with ferns or young palms, were used to invoke the powers of the female ancestors.⁴³ The women's behavior also followed traditional patterns: much noise, stamping, preposterous threats and a general raucous atmosphere were all part of the institution of "sitting on a man." Destroying an offender's hut — in this case the Native Court buildings — was clearly within the bounds of this sanctioning process.

The Women's War was coordinated throughout the two provinces by information sent through the market *mikiri* network. Delegates travelled from one area to another and the costs were paid by donations from the women's market profits.⁴⁴ Traditional rules were followed in that the participants were women — only a few men were involved in the demonstrations — and leadership was clearly in the hands of women.

The absence of men from the riots does not indicate lack of support. Men generally approved, and only a few older men criticized the women for not being more respectful toward the government. It is reported that both men and women shared the mistaken belief that the women, having observed certain rituals, would not be fired upon. The men had no illusions of immunity for themselves, having vivid memories of the slaughter of Igbo men during the conquest.⁴⁵ Finally,

40. J. S. HARRIS, *op. cit.*, pp. 147-48; Margery PERHAM, *Native Administration in Nigeria*, *op. cit.*, pp. 207ff.; C. K. MEEK, *op. cit.*, p. IX.

41. Margery PERHAM, *Native Administration in Nigeria*, *op. cit.*, pp. 212-19.

42. *Ibid.*, pp. 212ff.

43. Harris reports a curse sworn by the women on the pestles: "It is I who gave birth to you. It is I who cook for you to eat. This is the pestle I use to pound yams and coco yams for you to eat. May you soon die!" See J. S. HARRIS, *op. cit.*, pp. 143-45.

44. Harry A. GAILEY, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

the name given the rebellion by the Igbo — the Women's War — indicates that the women saw themselves following their traditional sanctioning methods of "sitting on" or "making war on" a man.

Since the British failed to recognize the Women's War as a collective response to the abrogation of rights, they did not inquire into the kinds of structures the women had that prepared them for such action. They failed to ask, "How do the women make group decisions? How do they choose their leaders?" Since they saw only a "riot," they explained the fact that the women injured no one seriously as "luck," never even contemplating that perhaps the women's actions had traditional limits.

Because the women — and the men — regarded the inquiries as attempts to discover whom to punish, they did not volunteer any information about the women's organizations. But there is at least some question as to whether the British would have understood them if they had. The market network was discovered, but suggested no further lines of inquiry to the British. The majority of District Officers thought that the men organized the women's actions and were secretly directing them. The Bende District Officer and the Secretary of the Southern Province believed that there was a secret "Ogbo Society" which exercised control over women and was responsible for fomenting the rebellion.⁴⁶ And the women's demands that they did not want the Native Court to hear cases any longer and that all white men should go to their own country, or, at least, that women should serve on the Native Courts and one be appointed District Officer — demands in line with the power of women in traditional society — were ignored.⁴⁷

All these responses fall into a coherent pattern: *not* of purposeful discrimination against women with the intent of keeping them from playing their traditional political roles, but of a prevailing blindness to the possibility that women had *had* a significant role in traditional politics and should participate in the new system of local government. A few political officers were "of the opinion that, if the balance of society is to be kept, the women's organizations should be encouraged alongside those of the men."⁴⁸ Some commissioners even recognized "the remarkable character of organization and leadership which some of the women displayed" and recommended that "more attention be paid to the political influence of women."⁴⁹ But these men were the exception: their views did not prevail. Even

45. Margery PERHAM, *Native Administration in Nigeria*, *op. cit.*, pp. 212ff; J. C. ANENE, *op. cit.*, pp. 207-24; S. O. ESIKE, *op. cit.*, p. 11; C. K. MEEK, *op. cit.*, p. x.

46. Harry A. GAILEY, *op. cit.*, pp. 130ff.

47. Sylvia LEITH-ROSS, *op. cit.*, p. 165; Margery PERHAM, *Native Administration in Nigeria*, *op. cit.*, pp. 165ff.

48. Margery PERHAM, *Native Administration in Nigeria*, *op. cit.*, p. 246.

49. A. E. AFIGBO, *op. cit.*, p. 187.

in the late 1930's when the investigations of Leith-Ross and Green revealed the decreasing vitality of women's organizations under colonialism, the British still did not include women in the reformed Native Administration. When political officers warned that *young men* were being excluded, however, steps were taken to return their traditional political status.⁵⁰

"Reforms" and Women's Loss of Power

In 1933 reforms were enacted to redress many Igbo grievances against the Native Administration. The number of Native Court Areas was greatly increased and their boundaries arranged to conform roughly to traditional divisions. Warrant Chiefs were replaced by "massed benches" — allowing large numbers of judges to sit at one time. In most cases it was left up to the villages to decide whom and how many to send.⁵¹ This benefitted the women by eliminating the corruption of the Warrant Chiefs, and it made their persons and property more secure. But it provided no outlet for collective action, their real base of power.

As in the village assembly, the women could not compete with the men for leadership in the reformed Native Administration because as individuals they lacked the resources of the men.⁵² In the various studies done on the Igbo in the 1930's, there is only one report of a woman being sent to the Native Court and her patrilineage had put up the money for her to take her titles.⁵³

Since the reformed Native Administration actually took over many functions of the village assemblies, women's political participation was seriously affected. Discussions on policy no longer included any adult who wished to take part but only members of the native courts. Men who were not members were also excluded, but men's interests and point of view were represented, and, at one time or another, many men had some chance to become members; very few women ever did.⁵⁴

The political participation and power of women had depended on the diffuseness of political power and authority within Igbo society. In attempting to create specialized political institutions on the Western model with participation on the basis of individual achievement, the British created a system in which there was

50. C. K. MEEK, *op. cit.*, p. 336.

51. Margery PERHAM, *Native Administration in Nigeria*, *op. cit.*, pp. 365ff.

52. C. K. MEEK, *op. cit.*, p. 203.

53. *Ibid.*, pp. 158-159. She was divorced and had to remain unmarried as a condition of her family's paying for her title as they wanted to be sure to get their investment back when future initiates paid their fees to the established members. If she remarried, her husband's family, and not her own, would inherit her property.

54. Sylvia LEITH-ROSS, *op. cit.*, pp. 171-72; Lord HAILEY, *Native Administration in the British African Territories, Part III, West Africa* (London: H. M. Stationary Office, 1951), pp. 160-65.

no place for group solidarity, no place for what thereby became "extra-legal" or simply illegal forms of group coercion, and thus very little place for women.

The British reforms undermined and weakened the power of the women by removing many political functions from *mikiri* and from village assemblies. In 1901 the British had declared all jural institutions except the Native Courts illegitimate, but it was only in the years following the 1933 reforms that Native Administration local government became effective enough to make that declaration meaningful. When this happened, the *mikiri* lost vitality,⁵⁵ although what has happened to them since has not been reported in detail. The reports that do exist mention the functioning of market women's organizations but only as pressure groups for narrow economic interest⁵⁶ and women's participation in Igbo unions as very low in two towns.⁵⁷

The British also weakened women's power by outlawing "self-help" — the use of force by individuals or groups to protect their own interests by punishing wrongdoers. This action — in accord with the idea that only the state may legitimately use force — made "sitting on" anyone illegal, thereby depriving women of one of their best weapons to protect wives from husbands, markets from rowdies, or coco yams from cows.⁵⁸

The British didn't know, of course, that they were banning "sitting on a man"; they were simply banning the "illegitimate" use of force. In theory, this didn't hurt the women, as wife-beaters, rowdies and owners of marauding cows could be taken to court. But courts were expensive, and the men who sat in them were likely to have different views from the women's on wife-beating, market "fun" and men's cows. By interfering with the traditional balance of power, the British effectively eliminated the women's ability to protect their own interests and made them dependent upon men for protection against men.

Since the British did not understand this, they did nothing to help women develop new ways of protecting their interests within the political system. (What the women *did* do to try to protect their interests in this situation should be a fruitful subject for study.) What women did *not* do was to participate to any significant extent in local government or, much later, in national government, and a large part of the responsibility must rest on the British, who removed legitimacy from women's traditional political institutions and did nothing to help women move into modern political institutions.

55. Sylvia LEITH-ROSS, *op. cit.*, pp. 110, 163, 214.

56. Henry L. BRETTON, "Political Influence in Southern Nigeria", in Herbert J. SPIRO (ed.), *Africa: The Primacy of Politics* (New York: Random House, 1966), p. 61.

57. Audrey C. SMOCK, *Ibo Politics: The Role of Ethnic Unions in Eastern Nigeria* (Cambridge: The Harvard University Press, 1971), pp. 65, 137.

58. Sylvia LEITH-ROSS, *op. cit.*, p. 109.

Missionary Influence

The effect of the colonial administration was reinforced by the missionaries and mission schools. Christian missions were established in Igboland in the late 19th century. They had few converts at first, but their influence by the 1930's was considered significant, generally among the young.⁵⁹ A majority of Igbo eventually "became Christians" — they had to profess Christianity in order to attend mission schools, and education was highly valued. But regardless of how nominal their membership was, they had to obey the rules to remain in good standing, and one rule was to avoid "pagan" rituals. Women were discouraged from attending *mikiri* where traditional rituals were performed or money collected for the rituals, which in effect meant all *mikiri*.⁶⁰

Probably more significant, since *mikiri* were in the process of losing some of their political functions anyway, was mission education. English and Western education came to be seen as increasingly necessary for political leadership — needed to deal with the British and their law — and women had less access to this new knowledge than men. Boys were more often sent to school, for a variety of reasons generally related to their favored position in the patrilineage.⁶¹ But even when girls did go, they tended not to receive the same type of education. In mission schools, and increasingly in special "training homes" which dispensed with most academic courses, the girls were taught European domestic skills and the Bible, often in the vernacular. The missionaries' avowed purpose in educating girls was to train them to be Christian wives and mothers, not for jobs or for citizenship.⁶² Missionaries were not necessarily against women's participation in politics — clergy in England, as in America, could be found supporting women's suffrage. But in Africa their concern was the church, and for the church

59. *Ibid.*, pp. 109–18; C. K. MEEK, *op. cit.*, p. xv. Maxwell states that by 1925 there were 26 mission stations and 63 missionaries (twelve of them missionary wives) in Igboland. The earliest station was established in 1857, but all but three were founded after 1900. Fifteen mission stations and 30 missionaries were among Igbo in Owerri and Calabar Provinces. See J. Lowry MAXWELL, *Nigeria: The Land, the People and Christian Progress* (London: World Dominion Press, 1926), pp. 150–52.

60. Sylvia LEITH-ROSS, *op. cit.*, p. 110; J. F. Ade AJAYI, *Christian Missions in Nigeria, 1841–1891: The Making of a New Elite* (Evanston, Ill.: The Northwestern University Press, 1965), pp. 108–09.

61. Sylvia LEITH-ROSS, *op. cit.*, pp. 133, 196–97, 316.

62. *Ibid.*, pp. 189–90. According to Leith-Ross, in the "girls' training homes... the scholastic education given was limited, in some of the smaller homes opened at a later date almost negligible, but the domestic training and the general civilizing effect were good." Evidence of these views among missionaries can be found in J. F. Ade AJAYI, *op. cit.*, pp. 65, 142–44; G. T. BASDEN, *Edith Warner of the Niger* (London: Seeley, Service and Co., Ltd., 1927), pp. 13, 16, 33, 55, 77, 86; Josephine C. BULIFANT, *Forty Years in the African Bush* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1950), pp. 163 and *passim*; W. P. LIVINGSTONE, *Mary Slessor of Calabar* (New York: George H. Doran Co., n.d.), pp. iii–vi; J. Lowry MAXWELL, *op. cit.*, pp. 55, 118.

they needed Christian families. Therefore, Christian wives and mothers, not female political leaders, was the missions' aim. As Mary Slessor, the influential Calabar missionary, said : "God-like motherhood is the finest sphere for women, and the way to the redemption of the world."⁶³

Victorianism and Women's Invisibility

The missionaries' beliefs about woman's natural and proper role being that of a Christian helpmate, and the administration's refusal to take the Igbo women seriously when they demanded political participation, are understandable in light of the colonialists having been socialized in a society dominated by Victorian values. It was during Queen Victoria's reign that the woman's-place-is-in-the-home ideology hardened into its most recent highly rigid form.⁶⁴ Although attacked by feminists, it remained the dominant mode of thought through that part of the colonial period discussed here ; and it is, in fact, far from dead today, when a woman's primary identity is most often seen as that of wife and mother even when she works 40 hours a week outside the home.⁶⁵

We are concerned here primarily with the Victorian view of women and politics which produced the expectation that men would be active in politics, but women would not. The ideal of Victorian womanhood — attainable, of course, by only the middle class, but widely believed in throughout society — was of a sensitive, morally superior being who was the hearthside guardian of Christian virtues and sentiments absent in the outside world. Her mind was not strong enough for the appropriately masculine subjects : science, business, and politics.⁶⁶ A woman who showed talent in these areas did not challenge any ideas about

63. W. P. LIVINGSTONE, *op. cit.*, p. 328.

64. Page SMITH, *Daughters of the Promised Land* (Boston : Little, Brown and Co., 1970), pp. 58-76 ; Doris STENTON, *The English Woman in History* (London : George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1957), pp. 312-44.

65. Eva FIGES, *Patriarchal Attitudes* (New York : Stein and Day, 1970) ; Ruth E. HARTLEY, "Children's Concepts of Male and Female Roles", *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly*, January 1960.

66. Walter E. HOUGHTON, *The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830-1870* (New Haven : The Yale University Press, 1957), pp. 349-53. Numerous studies of Victorian and post-Victorian ideas about women and politics describe these patterns. In addition to Houghton, Smith and Stenton, see, for example, Kirsten AMUNDSEN, *The Silenced Majority* (Prentice-Hall, 1971) ; Jessie BERNARD, *Women and the Public Interest* (Aldine-Atherton, 1971) ; John Stuart MILL and Harriet TAYLOR MILL, *Essays on Sex Equality* (University of Chicago Press, 1970) ; Martha VICINUS (ed.), *Suffer and Be Still : Women in the Victorian Age* (Indiana University Press, 1972) ; Cecil WOODHAM-SMITH, *Florence Nightingale, 1820-1910* (McGraw-Hill, 1951). It was not until 1929 that all English women could vote ; women over 30 who met restrictive property qualifications got the vote in 1918.

typical women : the exceptional woman simply "had the brain of a man," as Sir George Goldie said of Mary Kingsley.⁶⁷

A thorough investigation of the diaries, journals, reports, and letters of colonial officers and missionaries would be needed to prove that most of them held these Victorian values. But preliminary reading of biographies, autobiographies, journals and "reminiscences," and the evidence of their own statements about Igbo women at the time of the Women's War, strongly suggest the plausibility of the hypothesis that they were deflected from any attempt to discover and protect Igbo women's political role by their assumption that politics isn't a proper, normal place for women.⁶⁸

When Igbo women with their Women's War forced the colonial administrators to recognize their presense, their brief "visibility" was insufficient to shake these assumptions. Their behavior was simply seen as aberrant. When they returned to "normal," they were once again invisible. Although there was a feminist movement in England during that time, it had not successfully challenged basic ideas about women nor made the absence of women from public life seem to be a problem which required remedy. The movement had not succeeded in creating a "feminist" consciousness in any but a few "deviants," and such a consciousness is far from widespread today ; for to have a "feminist" consciousness means that one *notices* the "invisibility" of women. One *wonders* where the women are — in life and in print.

Understanding the assumptions about women's roles prevalent in Victorian society — and still common today — helps to explain how the introduction of supposedly modern political structures and values could reduce rather than expand the political lives of Igbo women. As long as politics is presumed to be a male realm, no one wonders where the women went. The loss of Igbo women's political institutions — in life and in print — shows the need for more Western scholars to develop enough of a feminist consciousness to start wondering.

67. Stephen GWYNN, *The Life of Mary Kingsley* (London : Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1932), p. 252. Mary Kingsley along with other elite female "exceptions" like Flora Shaw Lugard and Margery Perham, all of whom influenced African colonial policy, held the same values as men, at least in regard to women's roles. They did not expect ordinary women to have political power any more than the men did, and they showed no particular concern for African women.

68. See, for non-missionary examples, J. C. ANENE, *op. cit.*, pp. 222-34 ; W. R. CROCKER, *Nigeria : A Critique of British Colonial Administration* (London : George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1936) ; C. K. MEEK, *op. cit.* ; Mary H. KINGSLEY, *Travels in West Africa* (London : Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1897) ; Idem, *West African Studies* (London : Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1899) ; Margery PERHAM, *op. cit.* ; A. H. St. John WOOD, "Nigeria : Fifty Years of Political Development among the Ibos", in Raymond APTHORPE (ed.), *From Tribal Rule to Modern Government* (Lusaka, Northern Rhodesia : Rhodes-Livingstone Institute for Social Research, 1960).