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**The Women's Revolt of 1929/30 in South Eastern
Nigeria:
From the misinterpretation as a "riot" to the
significance as a female anti-colonial struggle**

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¹ Die Zusatzbezeichnung *Coursework* bezeichnet *Occasional Papers*, die im Rahmen von Lehrveranstaltungen erarbeitet wurden und daher nicht notwendigerweise auf originärer wissenschaftlichen Forschung basieren, in jedem Fall aber einen Beitrag zur wissenschaftlichen Diskussion leisten. Das vorliegende *Occasional Paper* basiert auf einer Arbeit, die im Wintersemester 2008/09 im Rahmen des am Institut für Afrikawissenschaften der Universität Wien abgehaltenen Seminars „*Widerstand und Gender im kolonialen Afrika*“ unter der Leitung von Dr. Ingeborg Grau verfasst wurde.

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1 Introduction

"Colonialism is not just a system of administration but a whole way of living and thinking." (Mba 1982: 38)

In 1929 thousands of women from six different ethnic groups of South-Eastern-Nigeria (Ibibio, Andoni, Ogoni, Bonny, Opobo, Igbo) mobilized against the humiliating behavior enacted upon them by the representatives and the beneficiaries of the colonial system. The demonstrations began on November 18, 1929 and lasted almost three months. As a result of the economic depression in Europe, the prices of palm products (major cash crop) had fallen dramatically and threatened the livelihoods of African farmers and traders and their families. The women got agitated and troubled when the rumor spread that they were going to be taxed for the little they were earning.

"In politics, the control of language means the control of history." (Van Allen 1976: 59) Van Allen's phrase reveals how important it is to question critically the use of terms and to reflect on why different groups (dominant and subordinate groups) give different names to the same historical event or conflict. A reflection of terminology will soon show that the given name depends on the preferences of the translator and his/her hidden agenda.

For this reason, there is one essential question about the Women's War that has to be asked and clarified in the first place: Which term fulfills the actions of the women in Nigeria in 1929/30? Is it "riot", "revolt", "protest", "war", or maybe "uprising"? In traditional Igbo society the events are known as "Ogu Umunwanyị". The word "ogu" is used in a very general sense, it can describe a protest, a rejection of an unbearable situation, a fight between two children, as well as a Civil War or a war between nations. Therefore, the English translation "Women's War" can't be satisfying. The term "war" is in another way problematic: A war is generally described as a fight or conflict between two equal parties, the word implicates planned hostilities, weapons, violence and destruction. This, however, was by no means the case, when women rose against British soldiers in South-Eastern Nigeria. Furthermore, a war is fought to get something totally different and not to get more of what someone already has to a certain extent. Many authors and historians (Akpan/Ekpo 1988, Noah 1995, etc.) thus propose to call the phenomenon a "revolt" or a "protest movement" as it holds many characteristics of a mass movement acknowledging the fact that the predominantly rural peasants of South-Eastern Nigeria were connected through a broad base among them. "Uprising" would also be an alternative. The two terms, "Protest Movement" and "Uprising", emphasize the circumstance that a gathering of people draws attention to deplorable state affairs for matters of their concern and thus demands strongly to be heard (cf. Akpan/Ekpo 1988: 1ff., 20f.; Dike 1995: ix-xvi, Osuji 1995: 40).

British colonial authorities in turn called the events "Aba Riots", a term that is out of place on two counts: Firstly, the actions neither started in Aba, nor did they peak out there. The protests had its origins in Oloko and then rapidly spread to other communities. The most tragic incident happened at Opobo (Ibibioland) where 31 women and one man were shot dead and more than 30 participants got wounded. The name "Aba Women's Riot" conceals the significant fact, that the protests took place in many villages at the same time (Ikot Abasi, Abak, Ikot Ekpene, Bende, etc.). The protests were not "some riots" in one town, but ranged over most of South-Eastern Nigeria and required a complex organization. Aba is "just" a town known for strong resistance. Secondly, the events are not comparable with a riot. A riot suggests an "uncontrolled, irrational action, involving violence to property or persons or both." (Noah 1995: 105) It is generally an isolated and unorganized phenomenon, sometimes meaningless, some sort of a short disturbance without any purpose or real motivation. That is how the British colonial authorities and historians wanted the public to see the Nigerian women's actions. Although the protests were local and spontaneous, they were much better organized and executed than a riot would have been. The actions were not irrational and the women were not hysterical, in fact they manifested remarkable leadership, solidarity across ethnic boundaries and exemplary organizational abilities (efficient communication system based on trading networks). The women's solidarity was based on their equal professional and social background as farmers, traders, mothers and wives and they were acting as defenders of their traditions and communities, while the men had resigned to colonial circumstances and the consequences for the indigenous population. But for an obvious reason it is not surprising that the British chose the term "riot": it serves to justify their reaction by force to restore order and it backs up the British idea of the "wild and undisciplined African people". The women's protests challenged the established colonial system and raised the question, why "barbaric natives" should struggle a "civilizing mission"? Of course colonialism was never the benevolent mission Britain wanted to make believe, it was simply an "institutionalization of inequalities" (Dike 1995: ix) Britain was unwilling to admit the revolutionary and nationalist character of the protests and did not want to take the women seriously. The term "Aba Riots" silently removed women from the political stage by giving no reference to the female gender of the actors at all (cf. Dike 1995: ix-xvi; Noah 1995: 105-110; Akpan/Ekpo 1988: 1ff.; Van Allen 1976: 60f.).

The British administrators had a wrong idea of African women. They considered them as docile, oppressed, without any rights and unable to understand or articulate any serious interests. Thus, for many colonial officials, the protests were a totally unexpected event. It has been suggested that the women were acting by order of the men folk and some colonialists even assumed that the participants were men dressed in women's clothes.

But there is no doubt that the phenomenon was primarily a women's affair, perhaps – where materially necessary – supported by men. The movement was initiated and carried out by the women themselves - in the provinces where the protests occurred, the entire female population participated in challenging the established system and according to colonial reports it was elderly women who took the roles of leaders and marched in the front rows of the crowds (cf. Dike 1995: xiiiiff.; Akpan/Ekpo 1988: 35ff.; Amadiume 1996: 133f.).

Although the people of the two other provinces of Eastern Nigeria – Ogoja and Onitsha – did not take part in the protests, they offered resistance to direct taxation of women. These women were told that the actions in the neighboring regions were a reaction to a decision of one single warrant-chief, so they believed the events to be a local affair. In reality, the women's revolt was a symbolic protest against the henchmen of colonialism (Native Courts, European trading firms, warrant-chiefs, etc.) and thus against colonialism itself (cf. Afigbo 1972: 203).

When the women revolted against the British, burnt down colonial institutions and freed prisoners (who had refused to pay taxes or to obey the colonial rule), the colonial administrators misunderstood the protest and accordingly handed the conflict situation badly, which led to the shooting and killing of many women. They interpreted the actions as direct attacks on the government and government property and did not understand the deep traditional meaning. Ekpo refers to the British behavior as a "cultural misunderstanding", because "[...] when one turns to the interpretation of symbols from a different culture, the tendency is to typify them in terms of one's own knowledge and experience." (Ekpo 1995: 49) But the women didn't want to overthrow the colonial system, as they were also aware of the benefits of colonialism, for example better medical care and transport networks, and their lack of education. The women just clamored for a modification of colonial rule. They demanded political representation, a political say in the selection of the administration and its officers, no taxation of women and the prosecution of corrupt warrant-chiefs and court members (cf. Dike 1995: ix-xvi; Akpan/Ekpo 1988: 1ff., 59; Nzegwu 1990: 449).

The rumor that women were going to be taxed is often named as one of the major reasons for the women's actions. Taxation may have been the catalyst for the events, nevertheless the true reasons for the women's grievances lie in the imposed colonial system that provoked profound transformations in all areas of traditional society – the economic, political, religious, educational and socio-cultural area. S.O. Jaja even described the women as "spokesmen for the entire nation" who punished Britain for its selfishness and inhumanity (Jaja quoted by Akpan/Ekpo 1988: 60).

A close analysis of the historical background, the true motives of the women and the forms that the protest took seem to be necessary to be at last able to understand the deeper meaning and the significance of the women's ultimate actions.

From all the important aspects that were mentioned above, now the following question arises:

What reasons did the women of Southeastern Nigeria have to mobilize or to protest and why did they just choose this form of resistance?

As Mba (1982) points out, colonialism connotes more than just an imposed system of administration, in fact it is "a whole way of living and thinking" (Mba 1982: 38) that changed the traditional African societies and had different impacts on the different social groups within these societies. According to Mba's assumption, or rather interpretation of colonialism, I enunciate the following two theses, which shall be verified (or falsified) in the course of this paper.

Theses:

- 1) The injustices of the British indirect rule system led to a limited scope of action for women and rendered them "invisible" in the social, economic and political sphere. The women felt that a protest movement in traditional manner was the only way to enforce their grievances and to demand a hearing in an exclusively male colonial system.
- 2) Although the protest actions were primarily targeted on the colonial representatives, the "Women's War of 1929" can be qualified as an anti-colonial protest, because the interventionist politics of the British affected the roles and statuses of women negatively both in a direct and an indirect way.

2 Structural changes and transformations during the period of colonialism

2.1 Indirect Rule

For the European great powers and thus for Britain as well, there were many reasons and motivations for colonial expansion, but like Akpan, Ekpo, Mba, Umoren and many others agree, there is one major factor that cannot be emphasized enough: the economy.

Britain wanted to make the utmost profit and for this reason it pursued the cheap political strategy of indirect rule in its African colonies like Nigeria. It established a system in which a few British colonial officials guided and ruled the land indirectly by using and acting through existing traditional African institutions or governmental systems and (more or less) traditional leaders. Thanks to indirect rule Britain did not need to spend too much money on the administration, what meant big savings for the government back in the homeland (cf. Umoren 1995: 62f.; Akpan 1995: 23f.).

In 1914 the northern and southern territories of Nigeria were amalgated and Britain imposed the same political systems and ideas of "native administration" in the South, which had already been developed in the North. The British government did so without paying enough attention to the important fact that these two territories had very different ecologies. Indirect rule worked well with the centralized autocratic governments of the Obas and Emirs in the Northern and Western states of Nigeria, but it was a failure in the south-eastern regions with its specific social structure: the people were usually living in independent small groups without any central government and thus their political structure was marked by autonomous and democratically governed settlements (cf. Akpan/Ekpo 1988: 11; Umoren 1995: 62f..).

The lack of knowledge of the traditional African system of government and in particular the one of South-Eastern Nigeria, led to the appointment of local agents who were devoted to the British – the so-called "Warrant Chiefs": They were largely chosen from among a new upcoming social class that generally emerged from the colonial export trade system and differed from indigenous chiefs or leaders in more than just one way. The new British-created chiefs were inexperienced and unqualified for a leadership role and they didn't owe their position to the general wish of the people or tradition, rather to an imposed, oppressing authority. They enjoyed more powers than native chiefs did usually and abused (under protection of the colonial government) their new status and position extensively to enrich themselves (cf. Akpan/Ekpo 1988: 11f.; Akpan 1995: 23ff.).

So by the time, these warrant chiefs became more and more unpopular and a symbol for colonial oppression. In the minds of the people they were associated with the introduction and implementation by force of oppressive government measure like for

example taxation, forced labor, trade restrictions or corruption. (Britain held the opinion that it was the indigenous men and women who should have to pay the costs for their own "civilization".) That is why the warrant chief system can be related to the women's actions in 1929/30 (cf. Umoren 1995: 63f.).

2.2 The Political Sphere

But it wasn't only the warrant chiefs who caused grievances within the population and especially among the women. Western influence has conventionally been seen as a positive force for the process of emancipation of African women: the suppression of "barbarous" practices (ostracism of mothers of twins, circumcision, etc.), the introduction of modern medicine, the improvement of hygiene or the provision of "free choice" appropriate to the basis of Christian monogamous marriage were generally mentioned in this connection. But there was one fact the British did not realize or did not want to understand: For many African women Western influences or interventions did not lead to political power, economic independence and autonomy. The structures and values of their traditional society, which had given women possibilities to participate in politics, were destroyed through the colonial "penetration" (cf. Van Allen 1976: 62).

In Igbo society the women certainly did not play an equal political role, but at least they did have a series of roles and participated in promoting order and resolving conflicts. Community decisions were only made after a variety of gatherings (lineage groups, age grades, secret and title societies, villagewide assemblies, etc.) and after mutual agreement was reached. During the discussions, every grown-up person, who had something important to say, was allowed to speak. Those who could speak very well and had wisdom were seen as "leaders", age was respected as well. Through their trading activities and their membership in women's meetings, age-grade activities, lineage groups or other social associations, women did not only enhance their autonomy and status, but also participated actively in community decision-making (cf. Van Allen 1976: 59-69, Ekpo 1995: 50-58).

In traditional Igbo society, the people could acquire prestige by personal engagement for the community, the social roles of persons (spouse, parents, children, siblings, etc.) and the sex came only on second place. Thus, a woman's status was to a great extent gained and determined by her own achievements and not ascribed because of her husband's social status. The society had high respect for its women, they were considered to be the breadwinner or providers of food. By refusing to cook and refusing to give the food to men, they could effectively enforce their will on men (cf. Ekpo 1995: 51, Van Allen 1976: 67).

Igbo society was politically based on a "dual sex system" – each sex had its own and autonomous sphere of authority (male and female political-religious institutions) but

there were also areas of shared responsibilities. As a result, women did not only solve disputes among women, they made decisions and rules affecting men's lives as well. Women had their own Governing Councils which listened to their specific concerns and protected their social and economic interests and needs and influenced the community's development for the purpose of women. Although Igbo society showed gender specific divisions, it usually avoided antagonistic gender relations. It preferred a consensus-seeking political process, because its socio-political structure was highly dependent on an active women's participation (spiritual, market and trading duties, maternal roles, etc.) (cf. Nzegwu 1990: 445ff.).

In traditional Igbo society each gender or social group had specific possibilities to apply sanctions, because representation without powers of sanctions to back it up meant non-representation and led inevitably to social marginalization. This political exclusion should though happen later – during the period of colonialism. "Colonialism in Africa was much more than a metaphor. It was an alienating historical condition that erased and silenced the voice of women." (Nzegwu 1990: 445) Men who didn't respect women's rights and values and didn't treat them right risked being "sat on", a form of sanction that could take various forms: from besieging the man in his house and singing ridiculous songs to question his manhood to roughing him up or even to destroy his possessions. Other men from the village hardly ever sided with the one of their own – it was the one's own business because he should not have incurred the women's wrath. The ritual of "sitting on a man" reveals two important aspects: First it shows a lack of absolute patriarchal authority of the men, and second it assured women a powerful control over male excesses and a right to say in policy decisions. Other times women even left their villages in groups and didn't come back until their demands were met (cf. Nzegwu 1990: 445-448).

Apart from political powers, women also had remarkable networking skills, which enabled them to mobilize instantly and across ethnic boundaries. The men often even made use of the women's networks – backed by the appropriate women's group, it was much easier for them to redress their complaints (cf. Nzegwu 1990: 447).

There existed two sorts of female political institutions which fulfilled important functions for the different groups of women: the associations of the "daughters of a lineage" (umuada) and the associations of the "wives of a lineage" (inyemedi): The first group involved women of the same natal village group. Since women often moved far away after marriage and remained lifelong strangers in the lineage of the man, they came together in meetings periodically to protect their rights. The group of the "wives of a lineage" was not based on common birth, but instead on common residence. In their gatherings, the women articulated their specific interests (in contrast to those of the

men), made rules about markets, crops and livestock to protect their interests as traders, farmers, wives and mothers and they did also hear complaints about mistreatment by men and discussed how to deal with the unbearable situation (strikes, refusing to cook, etc.) (cf. Van Allen 1976: 59-69; Ekpo 1995: 50-58).

The traditional Ibibio society had just as the Igbos high respect for its female gender: The terms "motherhood" and "womanhood" ("eka") were associated with greatness, respect and importance and thus often used in expressions of adoration and awe. Oral proverbs and folk tales described women as hardworking, brave, stoic, moralistic and resourceful and often Ibibio people used a female medium to communicate with the deity. The upbringing of the children was one of the main responsibilities of a woman and it was a common practice to name the children after their mothers to reflect their importance (cf. Ekpo 1995: 50-58).

Another interesting point is property: In traditional Ibibio society, the land was men's property, while women had the right to till the ground and owned the crops and all domestic animals like ducks, goats or chicken. The husband had to ask his wife for permission to get access to anything that belonged to her property. A woman was to a great extent economically independent, because she was allowed to sell the surplus of her products and keep the profits (cf. Ekpo 1995: 50-58).

Within the society, women participated in all social institutions, with the exception of the Ekpo institution – the traditional government policy organization. In reaction to this exclusion, there were some exclusively female institutions. The highly respected Ebre institution for example stood for the protection of morality. Women who had ever been suspected of having committed any social atrocity (stealing, etc.) were not allowed to become members and known thieves and their families often were ridiculed through songs.

Another women's institution was Iban Isong which was open to all women and dealt with matters affecting women's status, morals and interests – generally complaints about degradation of womanhood. If the complaint of an aggrieved person had been considered reasonable the institution would take action to ensure retribution (destruction of property, heavy fines, curses, etc.) (cf. Ekpo 1995: 50-58).

When the implementation of the colonial administrative system was finished, it seemed as if women had vanished from the political sphere in South-Eastern Nigeria. Since the British administrators were influenced by their own cultural background (thought patterns and values of the late Victorian, then Edwardian middle class society), they had no idea of the political roles of women or the importance of their organizations and networks in the traditional society. They considered the sphere of public life as an exclusively male

area, women were not allowed to vote, to be employed in civil service or to sit in Parliament. In the British administration and governmental system there were no women present at any level, thus the colonial officers did not consider them of any account and did not try to involve women in administrative bodies (cf. Mba 1982: 38-44). "The exclusion of women from decision-making forums has been justified by stereotyped notions of the roles of men and women in the home and the economy." (Mitter 1989: 1)

Under the warrant-chief system in the south-eastern provinces the executive and judicial responsibilities of traditional title societies and age grades were given to the chiefs and native courts. Although the selection of the chiefs was quite arbitrary, one criterion remained constant: No woman was ever offered this position until 1929. They were excluded from the colonial administration and could also never become members of the native courts, messengers, interpreters, court clerks, etc. These new positions were only open to men, in particular to men who had some wealth or education. Even in areas where once had been powerful female chiefs, women had no longer any say in the administrative system (cf. Mba 1982: 38-44).

But this obvious exclusion was not the only change women had to deal with, at the same time the courts began to interfere with their traditional judicial responsibilities. Their secret societies and associations were as well as the men's forbidden to take punitive action. For example women were no longer allowed to "sit on" anyone to enforce their judgments or to discipline offending members. Women's traditional titles became meaningless, their position was weakened and the lack of education and wealth made it impossible for them to attract the attention of the colonial officials. "The women's revolts of 1929 were a reaction of traditionally democratic people to the continued repression by a foreign power and its agents." (Akpan/Ekpo 1988: 3). The women felt victimized and made helpless by the new administration, its chiefs and courts and therefore they chose the strategy of mass demonstration to redress their grievances (cf. Mba 1982: 38-44, Akpan/Ekpo 1988: 3f.).

2.3 The Economic Sphere

The establishment of British indirect rule in South-Eastern Nigeria intensified many economic changes which had dramatic effects on the economic situation of women. Africa can be seen as a region of female farming par excellence. As already mentioned in the chapter before, in African society, nearly all tasks connected with food production were in the hands of women. There are some reasons why the agricultural labor was predominantly female: Firstly, families more often sent boys to school than girls, secondly, more young men than women were working on plantations or for wages in town, thirdly, many old women were widows and fourthly, elder men often left their work to their usually younger wives and their children (cf. Boserup 1989: 29).

For the European settlers and colonial administrators, who were used to a male farming system like in their home country, this division of labor between men and women was very unfamiliar and it did not fit into their idea of money-economy. They showed little or no acceptance for the female farming systems, because they considered cultivation as a natural male job and were of the opinion that if the African men only overcame their customary "laziness", they would soon become better farmers than the women. For this reason, the British practiced a discriminatory policy in education and training and promoted male labor by trying to force the "under-employed" men to produce commercial crops for export to Europe. Much more boys than girls attended school and girls and women barely obtained the chance to practice their newly acquired (school) knowledge in the formal sector. Women's part in agricultural work in the villages increased, because colonial officials as well as white settlers recruited (voluntary or forced) young, unmarried men for work on plantations, in mines, for road building, heavy constructional work, etc. Women were recruited for labor too, but in smaller numbers. However, even if it was not the women themselves who were forced to work, they were affected indirectly, because the absence of men meant that they had to take over the men's work on the farms as well as in the community. The urban migration of men increased women's work load later again as the low wages paid to urban migrants rendered the families strongly dependent on the women's farming and earnings (cf. Boserup 1989: 16-19, 54; Mba 1982: 5f.).

The colonial government promoted in particular the production of those cash crops needed for the metropolitan market and the home economy (cocoa, palm products, etc.). In Igboland for example the British pushed the growing of cassava. This plant was easy to cultivate and therefore the men considered it as an inferior crop and dedicated themselves to the production of more "prestige" crops like yams. For Igbo women on the other hand, cassava became just because of its easy production and less intensive cultivation, a symbol of women's independence and for potential wealth. Cassava could be used for both consumption and trade and during the famine period it could even replace yams, which increased women's profits and their role in the production of trade goods (cf. Mba 1982: 45ff.).

Nevertheless, women were pushed in the background in other ranges of production, which signified a source of rapid wealth for the men. An example can be given from the Western provinces of Nigeria, in particular in Yorubaland, where traditionally the men were the farmers and thus they took over the whole production of cocoa for export. Cocoa production and marketing became an exclusively male domain (cf. Mba 1982: 45).

The export and the prices of the crops and palm products were solely organized and controlled by the big European trading firms. At the same time, the prices varied with the

fluctuations of the world market, a fact that female traders often could not accept as they had to feed their families. They held the European firms responsible for these insecurities. The situation escalated in 1929/30 as the Great Depression peaked. The proximate inflation resulted in Nigeria (as in many countries) in unemployment, big retrenchments and loss of the people's livelihoods. Many Nigerian workers returned from the urban centers to increase the production of cash crops, but the increase of production did not lead to an increase in income, far from it: To be able to meet its economic needs during the period of economic depression Britain beat down the prices of export goods from the colonies while it led shoot up those of imported goods from Britain. As a result, the prices paid by European firms fell dramatically (for palm oil the price decreased from 13 to 6 Shilling in 1929) and at the same time the people of Nigeria had to pay exorbitant sums for imported goods (cf. Umoren 1995: 63).

In pre-colonial African societies the resource land was generally property of the community, whereas the members had access to a different extent to it. In patrilinear societies the men were entitled to cultivate the fields because of their membership in a lineage, women could mostly do so because of their social roles as mothers of sons or as wives. When the British came to Nigeria, they forced a process of individualization of estate and delegated the power of decision over the resource to the man, although actually the woman was the head of the household. From now on, men could bag the profits from the cash crops production even if they did not cultivate the fields by themselves (cf. Grau 2006: 88f.).

During the process of colonization the traditional barter trade was replaced by the European system of monetary exchange and at the same time a new concept or valuation of "labor" was firmly fixed in the minds of the people. All those areas which were related to men (wage labor, sale of cash crops, etc.) were considered as "productive", while traditional women's work in subsistence economy (household, children, care for the elderly, nursing, etc.) was classified as "unproductive". But actually, women played a significant role in assuring livelihood. Their work was and still is an essential addition to wage-work and constitutive for the formal economic sector which is characterized by little salaries and no, or insufficient financial securities in case of illness or age. During colonialism, female labor was rendered invisible and the government only broached the issue of women's work in connection with their relation to the children and the husband, or in connection with the private sphere (subsistence economy). They were solely seen as wives, mothers, daughters, widows or sisters. The colonial government held the view that women's sole obligation was to look after the household and the family while it considered men to have to deal with important issues, concerning economy, politics or the public sphere (cf. Grau 2006: 84f.; Grau 2003: 133).

For the purpose of meeting the economic needs of colonial Britain, the British also encouraged a change from traditional to modern commercial farming in its African colonies. With the introduction of new, improved agricultural equipment and modern scientific methods in the cultivation of cash crops, agriculture became less dependent on human (male) physical strength. But instead of facilitating women's work and boosting their productivity, this processing enhanced men's prestige at the expense of the female farmers, because only men learned how to operate with these new types of equipment. Women had to carry on working with the old hand tools and cultivating the fields by traditional methods. As a result, men's labor productivity increased rapidly, while the women's declined or remained static. The change of farming system widened the gap between women and men concerning their levels of knowledge and training and thus is directly connected with the women's loss of relative status within agriculture (cf. Boserup 1989: 53, 57).

The introduction of a money-economy allowed Britain to raise taxes which they treated as an adequate contribution of the indigenous people to the running of their society. In the northern provinces of Nigeria, taxation was a common economic measure even before colonialism, but in the South-Eastern regions, the people were used to a system of contributions in times of special need, which was collectively agreed and also collectively ended by the people. Women contributed their labor and their goods in particular through their village market and age grade associations. Taxation in the European sense was unknown. It was imposed by a foreign government and meant fixed and regular payments of cash, which required the counting of persons and their possessions. When men were taxed, women of all parts of Southern Nigeria protested both peacefully and violently against a possible taxation of women. They regarded such a measure as economically intolerable, because as a result of the interdependence of the family's income, women were already affected by the taxation of husbands and sons and had to bear financial hardships. A woman often had to help her husband to pay the taxes or communal dues for colonial projects, but no matter how wealthy she may have been, in colonial times she was always regarded as dependent on the man and never as the breadwinner (cf. Mba 1982: 45f.; Akpan/Ekpo 1988: 16; Nwabara 1977: 183).

On the one hand colonialism offered women some new opportunities to earn money in the economic sector (female traders, "middlemen" for European firms, etc.), but on the other hand it affected them strongly and in a negative way by modifying the traditional economic roles of men and women. The colonial government provided men more incentives for working in the domain of export trade for Europe and finally they replaced women. For the vast majority of women, the surplus remained very little so that the money barely sufficed for living and for paying a few years the school fees for the children. Only a few women were able to resist the growing competition of European

firms and native men. Even when women tried to break into the new market, they remained excluded from the most profitable economic areas and dependent on low-paid labor in the tertiary sector or as day-taler. The only possibility left to them (as well as to excluded men) was the informal sector of the economy (cf. Mba 1982: 52; Grau 2003: 139f.; Van Allen 1976: 77f.).

In agriculture it was the men who were encouraged to cultivate cash crops, although pre-colonial tradition emphasized women to be responsible for the farming. The discriminatory colonial policy handicapped women's farming by refusing them adequate training in modern agricultural techniques and by awarding men the ownership of land while giving women only a usufruct. But women did not only suffer the loss of economic independence and the loss of the exclusive right to growing and trade of certain foods. They also lost their ability to take economic sanctions both in the domestic and the public sphere and thus they could not add authority to their specific interests anymore. Their role was reduced to that of family aids and hired workers hooked on land belonging to the men. The young and healthy men on the contrary became more independent through their work for and their trade connections with the European firms. They carried on negotiations with the firms and in doing so they took the decisions and usurped big profits (cf. Mba 1982: 52; Amadiume 1996: 205f.).

To sum up: Through the transformation of African societies – in particular through the integration of young and healthy men in wage-work – Britain made colonialism profitable. It legitimated this process or rather paternalism with an ideology of "civilization", which pictured the new money-economy as a characteristic of "modern, progressive peoples." The well-established stereotype of the "lazy native" had an important function in this context: it served as a moral compurgation for using the colonies as new, sorely needed export markets and cheap commodity suppliers (cf. Grau 2003: 137). The new market requirements harmed and/or destroyed traditional forms of production and trade and put the self-supply of families at risk. At the same time women's load of work increased constantly. Work and production in the African people's own interest were replaced by forced labor for the benefit of a foreign economic system which led to a new division and grading of work based on money making. The economic change or rather the new money economy led to a transformation of gender relations and consequently - to the disadvantage of women - to a modified distribution of power within society (cf. Grau 2003: 134).

2.4 The Legal System

During the period of colonialism the British law was installed or rather imposed upon the existing customary law. The new legal system of course caused a number of social changes as it reflected the social values of the British social milieu.

The traditional society in Southern Nigeria was based on a polygamous, extended family. All women had to work and they had limited access to property rights. In contrast, the British society was based on the idea of a monogamous lifelong marriage with only one reason for its dissolution, namely adultery (cf. Mba 1982: 53).

With the establishment of British law, the legal status of women was enhanced by giving them more security in marriage and in the case of divorce: While under customary law the husband could send away his wife easily, divorce became a complicated process under statutory marriage. Theoretically both man and woman had equal recourse to divorce and the wife had the right to stay in the home afterwards. Furthermore, the rights of a married woman to property were enhanced (a wife could inherit from her husband when he died) and a Christian girl was allowed to refuse the marriage with a non-Christian man too (cf. Mba 1982: 54).

Under British law the wife often gained the right of custody of the children because the fact of marriage did not suffice for legal paternity anymore. However, under customary law a husband could lay claim to any of his wife's children at any time, if she had not repaid the dowry to him (cf. Mba 1982: 54).

Amadiume in contrast argues that this opinion is influenced by an ethnocentric philosophy and they award the traditional system of polygamy positive effects on women. For example, they refer to the fact that the women obtained great assistance in duties and responsibilities concerning the household and childcare and thus had more space to pursue political and economic activities. Elder women also enjoyed more authority within the family (cf. Amadiume 1996: 206).

But the customary law itself was also affected by the English law: Through the establishment of Native Courts in the region of Southern Nigeria the women's own councils lost the power of jurisdiction (cf. Mba 1982: 55).

2.5 The Religious and Educational System

Christianity understood as an influential theology and a special way of life, affected many areas of the traditional society, not only that of marriage. The Christian missionaries introduced on single male deity and from that time on all religious beliefs and rites centered on this god, his son, his bishops and his priests. Although women turned out to be the majority within the community, it was a couple of men who constituted the head of the "imported" Christianity – the clergy. Christianity was against so called "pagan-cults" – the cult of the earth goddess, so it denounced the religion of a deity as blasphemy and therewith banished the religious female "Ekwe"-title which was intrinsically tied to it. The Ekwe-tile was a kind of reward of female economic efforts and thus implied social and political acceptance of female success. Within an incredibly short

time, all prominent symbols of female self-confidence were abolished by colonialism (cf. Amadiume 1996: 181, 195; Mba 1982: 58).

The system of Christianity provoked two kinds of reaction within the female group. On the one side it was resisted – for example there existed a great female opposition to protecting twin babies – but on the other side it was also supported. In many areas the Christian churches launched women's or mother's associations and leagues which met regularly to ensure the welfare of its members, especially of those women who were living far away from their home villages. Nevertheless, the converted women were barely offered offices of leadership. The majority was excluded from the clergy as well as from the administration of the Christian church. That is one of the reasons why many women turned towards the indigenous churches, where they played an important role (cf. Mba 1982: 58f.).

Church and school or rather education, can be regarded as synonymous at this time, because the Christian church first took the initiative to establish (missionary) schools in Nigeria and the Christian religion was a condition precedent to registration in schools. The concept worked as many youths saw their chance for a "pen-pushing"-job and already during the first lessons they learned that the traditional religious beliefs and the adoration of traditional religious symbols had to be condemned as "false gods" (cf. Amadiume 1996: 178; Ifeka-Moller 1975: 141).

By teaching the Victorian ideology in the schools, education in the Western sense strengthened gender relations like they were predominant in Europe: A Woman's place was at home as her mind was not strong enough to cope with science, business or politics (idealization of the mentally inferior bower), exceptionally smart women were considered to have "the brain of a man". The girls were trained for domestic workings (cooking, sewing, cleaning, etc.), they learned how to become "good Christian wives and mothers" and they did not receive the education necessary for jobs, citizenship or political leadership. The Church in Africa simply was not interested in pushing female political leaders, in fact they only needed "good Christian families". Therefore, education meant in truth evangelization and a good way to train future clergymen and teachers. Because women could never become members of the clergy and work as teachers only much later, the girl's education was of no importance for the Church, a fact that is reflected in the low numbers of girls attending primary school (more boys accredited). The missionary schools also offered men a further education and thus access to better professions generally considered as male domains (tailor, printer, cabinet maker, etc.). Nevertheless, African women used their acquired skills to establish themselves in the "male colonial world" (cf. Amadiume 1996: 195ff.; Van Allen 1976: 76f.; Grau 2006: 85ff.; Mba 1982: 61).

The key point is, that Western education led to a new principle of differentiation within the society of Southern-Nigeria, which had partially a sexist character. Far more boys than girls received education and thus later salaried employment, positions of leadership or responsibility and social prestige. In contrast, the girls' and the women's lack of education resulted in the lack of prestige and social status. The reasons for this process of differentiation do not only lie in the colonial system, but can be found in the indigenous society too: When parents recognized the value of education, they sent rather their sons than their daughters to school as they were preferred by the colonial institutions. Christian missionaries and the colonial government had their own prejudices against the education and labor of women, so it was not their intention to change the attitude of the people (cf. Mba 1982: 66).

3 Symbolism and the meaning of the protests

"With this war women moved from the footnotes of the history of Nigeria into the centre chapters and pages of Nigerian history." (Umoren 1995: 71)

Finally, an interpretative analysis of the essential components of the movement in the Efik and Ibibio area – the dressing, the "weapons", the women's acts or rather tactics – shall reveal the true meaning of the protests and confirm the assumption that they were basically gender-based (women as principal actors) and beyond that an anti-colonial struggle.

The dress and the body decoration:

During the protests, the women's faces were painted with white clay and charcoal. Usually a woman did so, when she had just given birth to a child, thus this act was a symbol of motherhood and should emphasize the female gender of the actors. By dressing in fern and short wrapper, women asserted the justified claim for a traditional government, a government elected by the people and for the people. At Utu Etim Ekpo the women even declared that "there's no more (colonial) government" (cf. Umoren 1995: 68f.; Akpan/Ekpo 1988: 58).

The "weapons":

The weapons of the women were not weapons in the truest sense of the word, but included cassava sticks, young palm leaves, songs and dance. The young palm leaves were a traditional symbol of prohibition and ejection and in addition, an initiation for a communal discussion of an urgent issue. By doing so during the revolt, the women wanted to make clear, that the colonial rules of the white men were simply no longer accepted. Because planting and cooking cassava were traditionally considered as female activities, the sticks can be interpreted as another symbol of femininity (cf. Umoren 1995: 69f.). The beating of pestles and sticks on the fence was in fact an effective traditional behavior to express impatience and to demand a speedy agreement, but it panicked the British soldiers who thereupon began to shoot at the women at Ikot Abasi (cf. Akpan/Ekpo 1988: 58).

Songs and dance fulfilled important functions in traditional African societies. By singing and dancing the people expressed their moods and feelings (approval, reproach, admiration, respect, scorn, etc.), they communicated ideas and beliefs and also told stories (of joy, sorrow, anger, defeat, victory, etc.). The songs of the protest movement expressed anger about taxation, about the fall of prices and the corrupt warrant-chiefs and court members (cf. Umoren 1995: 69f.).

The acts of demolition:

The act of demolition by burning down native courts, prisons and commercial houses has a very symbolic character, as to burn down a house was in traditional societies an absolute taboo for everyone. Such a behavior would have caused heavy sanctions for the person (heavy fines, ostracism within society, etc.) The fact that women were going beyond traditional rules does not only show how unbearable the colonial situation must have been for them, but also the women's unshakable courage and will to change the state they were in and to take action (cf. Umoren 1995: 71).

Finally, the women of South-Eastern Nigeria exercised another traditional norm – the sanctity of the nude female. In pre-colonial times it was strictly forbidden to harm or injure women who were nude and marching in protest. The women thought that they were immune from danger because of the traditional rules and that the British soldiers wouldn't dare to fire on them. The women's outfit and their acting in the fight thus did not connote "frivolity and mischief", as described in the colonial reports, but solemnity and traditional symbolism (cf. Akpan/Ekpo 1988: 57f.).

4 Conclusion

The rumor that the colonial government had the intention to introduce the taxation of women was the most publicized event named to be the reason for the women's mass protests in South-Eastern Nigeria in 1929/30. But there were several other immediate and obvious causes for frustration: 1) The corrupt and unjust warrant-chiefs, court clerks and messengers who served the colonial administration as controlling body on the local level and who could enrich themselves at the expense of the indigenous people, in particular at that of the women, without restrictions. 2) The permanent demands of the colonial government (request for payment, forced labor for the profit of European firms, etc.) asserted by force and threats like imprisonment of the men-folk or heavy fines. 3) The poor prices of palm products due to the economic depression in Europe, Britain's insensitive fiscal policies and the exclusive right of European firms to regulate prices, which led to an additional burden on the women's shoulders as they had to pay for the children's feeding, clothing and education. Nevertheless, the lawless behavior of the representatives of the colonial government in all its facets and at a time of economic crises and increasing hardship was not the only essential factor for the women's grievances. "All these short-run events would probably have failed to generate a mass uprising of women had there not been a more fundamental conflict which particularly affected them as a sex." (Ifeka-Moller 1975: 142)

On closer examination it becomes evident that the nature of colonialism caused profound structural changes in traditional Nigerian societies, which resulted for longer periods in unbearable living conditions for the women. With the implementation of the British colonial system and its (Western) values, a strong male domination was imposed on all spheres of social life (politics, economy, law, religion, education) in both direct and indirect ways. The effects were not only far-ranging, but sometimes also controversial. On the one hand the status of women within community was diminished under colonial rule, on the other hand it was also enhanced in certain areas.

In the governmental and administrative system women lost almost all traditional responsibilities and their access to political participation. They were excluded from all administrative levels and activities as only men were appointed as court members, interpreters, messengers, etc., and their titles and institutions or rather associations were abolished, so that women and their special needs and interests weren't represented (protected) in the political sphere anymore.

In economy, although colonialism provided better opportunities for some women who could take root in trade and come to terms with the European firms, the new structures based on the principles of money exchange gave rise to a takeover by men of traditional exclusive female areas and to the invisibility of women's work (male command of

mechanization, men as heads of the families and owner of land, male activities as "productive" sectors etc.), what diminished their social status and fortified their economic dependence.

With the establishment of British law (superseded customary law) women gained more rights and thus more security in marriage and divorce, as well as they were enabled to acquire property.

The Christian Church and its missionaries included women only in their plans to create "good Christian families", but deprived them of the responsibilities they had in traditional religion by refusing to offer them positions of leadership. To some extent, women regained their influence in the indigenous churches.

The new educational system was strongly interwoven with Christianity and without doubt built to the disadvantage of girls and women. Only for a minority of the girls, education led to access to the formal labor market, as the colonial government preferred to train boys and to prepare them for their future functions within the colonial system.

"By making women feel victimized and deprived, colonialism provided them with reasons to protest and they were able to mobilize through those traditional associations which were not destroyed by colonialism." (Mba 1982: 67)

Therefore the roots of the protests can be found in the women's anger at the loss of economic, political and social status in the wake of strengthened male dominance. These roots also determined the form of protest the women chose to express and enforce their grievances.

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