

# BOOK REVIEW

**Marc Matera, Misty L. Bastian, and Susan Kingsley Kent.** *The Women's War of 1929: Gender and Violence in Colonial Nigeria*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. 239 pp. List of Illustrations. Chronology of Major Events. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$150.00. Hardcover. ISBN: 978-1843760115.

Most histories of modern African colonialism have focused on the relationships between white male figures and African men. This approach to African communities during the colonial period portrays women as invisible bystanders and as a lesser essential social group. In *The Women's War of 1929: Gender and Violence in Colonial Nigeria*, Marc Matera, Misty L. Bastian, and Susan Kingsley Kent shift the popular way of viewing colonial history by looking at women as active participants in African societies prior to and during colonialism. This work is crucial to understanding gender dynamics and functions before and during the colonial interactions between the West (European countries) and Africa. Of course, in the many different African kingdoms and regions, the way gender functioned within the societies varied. Different ethnic groups related to women differently. For example, in territories such as northern Nigeria, because of the prolonged presence of Islam, women were already treated as non-active participants in the pre-colonial periods. Muslim women did not participate in wars, and they did not occupy high political positions compared to women in Yoruba land and Igbo land, where the inhabitants continued to practice Indigenous religions until the arrival of the missionaries.

The authors focus on a war that was initiated and executed by women in 1929 in southeastern Nigeria. This work challenges the norms of colonial history in two ways: first, in reporting that there was a revolt against the colonialists, who claimed to have brought civilization and Christian religion to the Africans. Except for post-colonialists who use these sorts of events as evidence of African resistance to colonial powers and dominations, missionary reports in the past have mostly depicted Africans as people who celebrated whiteness over darkness, Christianity over their ancestral religions, and civilization over savagery. Second, the authors expose the errors in the way colonial histories were reported in the past by not only revealing a revolt against the colonial powers, but by including the fact that African

© The Author(s), 2023. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of the African Studies Association.

women were the ones who mobilized themselves and carried out this revolt. The colonial powers in Nigeria and imperialists in Britain initially refused to believe that Nigerian women were the sole initiators and executors of this revolt. Instead, they used other ways to explain it and to understand how the revolt happened.

In this book's early chapters, the authors explain the demographics of southeastern Nigeria, which differed from those of other parts of the country before colonialism. They describe the freedom enjoyed by women in the southeast, although the women still did not see themselves as equals to men. But women are described in the pre-colonial period as individuals who had freedom of religion, freedom to conduct business, and freedom to interact with other women in more expansive spaces. For example, the authors describe how southeastern women controlled the market space. In this society, women conducted most of the transactions in the markets, so the women leaders in the market decided how businesses and transactions would take place. In the pre-colonial period in southeastern Nigeria, the authors show that women formed strong connections in groups such as *Nwaobiola* (114–15). These Nwa groups were dance groups which sometimes interacted with religious leaders or with the gods and goddesses themselves, all of whom offered some directions to the women. When the need arose, these groups went from door to door, dancing and advising women on issues related to childbearing, sexuality, religion, or even protesting men (the authority). This kind of group never existed in the north or other parts of Nigeria before colonialism. The same is true of gender relationships in the Western part of the world. In many European societies of the past, women did not have much freedom to form groups like those of the pre-colonial Igbo women. This is partly why colonialists and imperialists were not able to admit that “savage” women could mobilize by the thousands in revolt against colonial legacies and policies.

In the second chapter of the book, the authors demonstrate that the arrival of the colonialists and missionaries in southeastern Nigeria brought a new order to the region, because the colonialists viewed the Africans' pre-colonial life as chaotic. It may have been chaotic in many senses, but two ways were especially problematic, the first being the leadership structure of Igbo land compared to northern Nigeria (49). The southeast in the pre-colonial period did not have the necessary leadership structures which would enable the British quest for ruling a larger group of people through “indirect rule.” This frustrated the British, and they were forced to invent other ways to bring the southeastern people together to rule them. In addition to this, the freedom women had to lead different spaces was not ideal for the British, so they described the southeastern society as chaotic. For this reason, the colonialists and missionaries did not include women in their new restructuring of southeastern society. The missionaries paid more attention to educating men than women, and the colonialists appointed men as their agents and representatives, but not women (39). This sidelining and marginalization of

women bothered the southeastern women, although they could do little about it.

The relegation of southeastern women in Igbo societies to a marginal role was the root cause of the revolt of 1929 which the authors engage in this book, but the decision to force women to pay taxes on their businesses was the catalyst (136). At first, women were not included among the taxpayers in southeastern colonial society. But later, the British colonialists decided that the women should pay taxes as well as men. Upon hearing this, women started using their dance groups and other associations to mobilize themselves in large numbers to protest, damaging colonial and government buildings and looting colonial treasuries and food stores (145–46). This protest was initiated from the southeast and went down to some areas farther south, including Ibibio women. Colonial police and soldiers ended up shooting some of the protesters, but the colonial administration in Nigeria and imperialists in Britain quickly intervened by setting up a committee of inquiry to investigate the incident. The British were perplexed by the African women's ability to coordinate such activity for months.

The authors portray the strength, wisdom, and uniqueness of the southeastern women in the early colonial period as examples of the revolts and resistance to many colonial powers in the twentieth century. The only thing that was not clear was the book's title. The title seems to give the impression that this book discusses the women's war in all of Nigeria during the colonial period, but in a real sense, its focus is on southeastern Nigeria.

Kefas Lamak 

*University of Iowa*

*Iowa City, Iowa, USA*

*kefas-lamak@uiowa.edu*

doi:10.1017/asr.2023.21