regaining much of the position they held in the precolonial dual-sex system, the national political level remains almost exclusively single-sex. There has been little if any appreciation of the complementary political roles men and women held in traditional society. Few women have been appointed to positions of importance by the military government in Nigeria. In theory, modern political roles are supposed to be “sex blind,” in that office-holders are seen as representing a constituency of both sexes. Yet the absence of women from meaningful political representation in independent Nigeria can be viewed as showing the strength of the legacy of single-sex politics that the British colonial masters left behind.

‘Aba Riots’ or Igbo ‘Women’s War’? Ideology, Stratification, and the Invisibility of Women

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The events that occurred in Calabar and Owerri provinces in southeastern Nigeria in November and December of 1929, and that have come to be known in Western social-science literature as the “Aba Riots,” are a natural focus for an investigation of the impact of colonialism on Igbo women. * In the development and results of that crisis can be found all the elements of the system that has weakened women’s position in Igboland—and in much of the rest of Africa as well.† The “Aba Riots” are also a nice symbol of the “invisibility” of women: “Aba Riots” is the name adopted by the British; the Igbo called it Ogu Unmunwanyi, the “Women’s War” (Uchendu 1965: 5; Okonjo 1974: 25, n. 40). This is more than a word game. In politics, the control of language means the control of history. The dominant group and the subordinate group almost always give different names to their conflicts, and where the dominant group alone writes history, its choice of terminology will be perpetuated. Examples of this manipulation of language abound.

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† Today the Igbo, numbering about 8.7 million, live mainly in the East-Central State of Nigeria, with some half million in the neighboring Mid-Western State. The area in which they live corresponds approximately to Igboland at the time of the colonial conquest.
in American history, as any examination of standard textbooks will reveal.

Calabar and Owerri provinces covered roughly the southeast and southwest quarters of Igboiland, the traditional home of the Igbo peoples. In November of 1929, thousands of Igbo women from these provinces converged on the Native Administration centers—settlements that generally included the headquarters and residence of the British colonial officer for the district, a Native Court building and a jail, and a bank or white trader’s store (if such existed in the district).* The women chanted, danced, sang songs of ridicule, and demanded the caps of office (the official insignia) of the Warrant Chiefs, the Igbo chosen from each village by the British to sit as members of the Native Court. At a few locations the women broke into prisons and released prisoners. Sixteen Native Courts were attacked, and most of these were broken up or burned. The “disturbed area” covered about 6,000 square miles and contained about two million people. It is not known how many women were involved, but the figure was in the tens of thousands. On two occasions, British District Officers called in police and troops, who fired on the women and left a total of more than 50 dead and 50 wounded. No one on the other side was seriously injured.†

The British “won,” and they have imposed their terminology on history; only a very few scholars have recorded that the Igbo called this the “Women’s War.” And in most histories of Nigeria today one looks in vain for any mention that women were even involved. “Riots,” the term used by the British, conveys a picture of uncontrolled, irrational action, involving violence to property or persons, or both. It serves to justify the “necessary action to restore order,” and it accords with the British picture of the outpouring of Igbo from their villages as some sort of spontaneous frenzy, explained by the general “excitability” of these “least disciplined” of African peoples (Perham 1937: 219). “Aba Riots,” in addition, neatly removes women from the picture. What we are left with is “some riots at Aba”—not by women, not involving complex organization, and not ranging over most of southeastern Nigeria.

To the British Commissions of Enquiry established to investigate the events, the Igbo as a whole were felt to be dissatisfied with the general system of administration. The women simply were seen as expressing this underlying general dissatisfaction. The British explanation for the fact that women rather than men “rioted” was twofold: the women were aroused by a rumor that they would be taxed at a time of declining profits from the palm products trade; and they believed themselves to be immune from danger because they thought British soldiers would not fire on women (Perham 1937: 215–17). The possibility that women might have acted because as women they were particularly distressed by the Native Administration system does not seem to have been taken any more seriously by the Commissions than women’s demands in testimony that they be included in the Native Courts (Leith-Ross 1959: 165).

The term “Women’s War,” in contrast to “Aba Riots,” retains both the presence and the significance of the women, for the word “war” in this context derived from the pidgin English expression “making war,” an institutionalized form of punishment employed by Igbo women and also known as “sitting on a man.” To “sit on” or “make war on” a man involved gathering at his compound at a previously agreed-upon time, dancing, singing scurrilous songs detailing the women’s grievances against him (and often insulting him along the way by calling his manhood into question), banging on his hut with the pestles used for pounding yams, and, in extreme cases, tearing up his hut (which usually meant pulling the roof off). This might be done to a man who particularly mistreated his wife, who violated the women’s market rules, or who persistently let his cows eat the women’s crops. The women would stay at his hut all night and day, if necessary, until he repented and
promised to mend his ways (Leith-Ross 1939: 109; Harris 1940: 146–48).*

"Women’s War" thus conveys an action by women that is also an extension of their traditional method for settling grievances with men who had acted badly toward them. Understood from the Igbo perspective, this term confirms the existence of Igbo women’s traditional institutions, for “making war” was the ultimate sanction available to women for enforcing their judgments. The use of the word “war” in this specifically Igbo sense directs attention to the existence of those female political and economic institutions that were never taken into account by the British, and that still have not been sufficiently recognized by contemporary social scientists writing about the development of nationalist movements.

Conventionally, Western influence has been seen as “emancipating” African women through (1) the weakening of kinship bonds; (2) the provision of “free choice” in Christian monogamous marriage; (3) the suppression of “barbarous” practices (female circumcision, ostracism of mothers of twins, slavery); (4) the opening of schools; and (5) the introduction of modern medicine, hygiene, and (sometimes) male suffrage. What has not been seen by Westerners is that for some African women—and Igbo women are a striking example—actual or potential autonomy, economic independence, and political power did not grow out of Western influences but existed already in traditional “tribal” life. To the extent that Igbo women have participated in any political action—whether anticolonial or nationalist struggles, local community development, or the Biafran war—it has been not so much because of the influence of Western values as despite that influence.

* Similar tactics were also used against women for serious offenses (see Leith-Ross 1939: 97).

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must be examined in terms of both structures and values. Also involved is a consideration of what it means to talk about “polities” and “political roles” in a society that has no differentiated, centralized governmental institutions.

Fallers (1968) suggests that for such societies, it is necessary to view “the polity or political system . . . not as a concretely distinct part of the social system, but rather as a functional aspect of the whole social system: that aspect concerned with making and carrying out decisions regarding public policy, by whatever institutional means.” Fallers’s definition is preferable to several other functionalist definitions because it attempts to give some content to the category “political.” Examples will make this clear. Let us take a society that has no set of differentiated political institutions to which we can ascribe Weber’s “monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory,” and yet that holds together in reasonable order; we ask the question, What are the mechanisms of social control? To this may be added a second question, based on the notion that a basic governmental function is “authoritative allocation”: What are the mechanisms that authoritatively allocate goods and services? A third common notion of politics is concerned with power relationships, and so we also ask, Who has power (or influence) over whom?

The problem with all of these approaches is that they are at the same time too broad and too narrow. If everything in a society that promotes order, resolves conflicts, allocates goods, or involves the power of one person over another is “political,” then we have hardly succeeded in distinguishing the “political” as a special kind of activity or area or relationship. Igbo women certainly played a role in promoting order and resolving conflicts (Green 1947: 178–216; Leith-Ross 1939: 97, 106–9), but that does not make them political actors. In response to each of those broad definitions, we can still ask, Is this mechanism of social control or allocation, or this power relationship, a political mechanism or relationship? In answering that question, Fallers provides some help. It is their relationship to public policy that makes mechanisms, relationships, or activities “political.”
There are many different concepts of “public” in Western thought. We will consider only two, chosen because we can possibly apply them to Igbo politics without producing a distorted picture. There seem to be actions taken, and distinctions made, in Igbo politics and language that make it not quite so ethnocentric to try to use these Western concepts. One notion of “public” relates it to issues that are of concern to the whole community; ends served by “political functions” are beneficial to the community as a whole. Although different individuals or groups may seek different resolutions of problems or disputes, the “political” can nevertheless be seen as encompassing all those human concerns and problems that are common to all the members of the community, or at least to large numbers of them. “Political” problems are shared problems that are appropriately dealt with through group action—their resolutions are collective, not individual. This separates them from “purely personal” problems. The second notion of “public” is that which is distinguished from “secret,” that is, open to everyone’s view, accessible to all members of the community. The settling of questions that concern the welfare of the community in a “public” way necessitates the sharing of “political knowledge”—the knowledge needed for participation in political discussion and decision. A system in which public policy is made publicly and the relevant knowledge is shared widely contrasts sharply with those systems in which a privileged few possess the relevant knowledge—whether priestly mysteries or bureaucratic expertise—and therefore control policy decisions.

Traditional Igbo society was predominantly patrilineal and segmental. People lived in “villages” composed of the scattered compounds of relatively close patrilineal kinsmen; and related villages formed what are usually referred to as “village groups,” the largest functional political unit. Forde and Jones (1959: 9, 39) found between 4,000 and 5,000 village groups, ranging in population from several hundred to several thousand persons. Political power was diffuse, and leadership was fluid and informal. Community decisions were made and disputes settled through a variety of gatherings (villagewide assemblies; women’s meetings; age grades; secret and title societies; contribution clubs; lineage groups; and congregations at funerals, markets, or annual rituals) as well as through appeals to oracles and diviners (Afigbo 1972: 15–36).* Decisions were made by discussion until mutual agreement was reached. Any adult present who had something to say on the matter under discussion was entitled to speak, so long as he or she had something that the others considered worth listening to; as the Igbo say, “A case forbids no one.” Leaders were those who had “mouth”; age was respected, but did not confer leadership unless accompanied by wisdom and the ability to speak well. In village assemblies, after much discussion, a small group of elders retired for “consultation” and then offered a decision for the approval of the assembly (Uchendu 1965: 41–44; Green 1947: chaps. 7–11; Harris 1940: 142–43).

In some areas, the assemblies are said to have been of all adult males; in other areas, women reportedly participated in the assemblies, but were less likely to speak unless involved in the dispute and less likely to take part in “consultation.” Women may have been among the “arbitrators” that disputants invited to settle particular cases; however, if one party to the dispute appealed to the village as a whole, male elders would have been more likely to offer the final settlement (Green 1947: 107, 112–13, 116–29, 169, 199). Age grades existed in most Igbo communities, but their functions varied; the predominant pattern seems to have been for young men’s age grades to carry out decisions of the village assembly with regard to such matters as clearing paths, building

* Though there is variation among the Igbo, the general patterns described here apply fairly well to the southern Igbo, those involved in the Women’s War. The chief exceptions to the above description occur among the western and riverain Igbo, who have what Afigbo terms a “constitutional village monarchy” system, and among the Afikpo of the Cross River, who have a double-descent system and low female participation in economic and political life (P. Ottenberg 1959 and 1965). The former are more hierarchically organized than other Igbo but are not stratified by sex, having a women’s hierarchy parallel to that of the men (Nzirim 1959); the latter are strongly stratified by sex, with the senior men’s age grade dominating community decision-making. Afikpo women’s age grades are weak; there is no mikhiri or, because of the double-descent system,
bridges, or collecting fines (Uchendu 1965: 43). There was thus no distinction among what we call executive, legislative, and judicial activities, and no political authority to issue commands. The settling of a dispute could merge into a discussion of a new “rule,” and acceptance by the disputants and the group hearing the dispute was necessary for the settlement of anything. Only within a family compound could an individual demand obedience to orders; there the compound head offered guidance, aid, and protection to members of his family, and in return received respect, obedience, and material tokens of good will. Neither was there any distinction between the religious and the political: rituals and “political” discussions were interwoven in patterns of action to promote the good of the community; and rituals, too, were performed by various groups of women, men, and women and men together (Afigbo 1972; Meek 1957: 98–99, 105; Uchendu 1965: 39–40).

Matters dealt with in the village assembly were those of common concern to all. They could be general problems for which collective action was appropriate (for example, discussion might center on how to make the village market bigger than those of neighboring villages); or they could be conflicts that threatened the unity of the village (for example, a dispute between members of different families, or between the men and the women) (Harris 1940: 142–43; Uchendu 1965: 34, 42–43). It is clear, then, that the assembly dealt with public policy publicly. The mode of discourse made much use of proverbs, parables, and metaphors drawn from the body of Igbo tradition and familiar to all Igbo from childhood. Influen tial speech involved the creative and skillful use of this tradition to provide counsel and justification—to assure others that a certain course of action was both a wise thing to do and a right thing to do. The accessibility (the “public” nature) of this knowledge is itself indicated by an Igbo proverb: “If you tell a proverb

ogbo (these terms are defined later in this paper, on pp. 68–69); Akpko women have not traditionally been active in trade; and female status among the Akpko is generally very low. Akpko Igbo, unlike almost all other Igbo, have a men’s secret society that has “keeping women in their place” as a major purpose (J. Ottenberg 1939 and 1965).

to a fool, he will ask you its meaning.” Fools were excluded from the political community, but women were not.*

Women as well as men thus had access to political participation; for women as well as men, public status was to a great extent achieved, not ascribed. A woman’s status was determined more by her own achievements than by those of her husband. The resources available to men were greater, however; thus, although a woman might rank higher among women than her husband did among men, very few women could afford the fees and feasts involved in taking the highest titles, a major source of prestige (Meek 1957: 203). Men “owned” the most profitable crops and received the bulk of the money from bridewealth. Moreover, if they were compound heads, they received presents from compound members. Through the patrilineage, they controlled the land. After providing farms for their wives, they could lease excess land for a good profit. Men also did more of the long-distance trading, which had a higher rate of profit than did local and regional trading, which was almost entirely in women’s hands (Green 1947: 32–42).

Women were entitled to sell the surplus of their own crops. They also received the palm kernels as their share of the palm produce (they processed the palm oil for the men to sell). They might also sell prepared foods, or the products of women’s special skills (processed salt, pots, baskets). All the profits were theirs to keep (Leith-Ross 1939: 90–93, 138–39, 143). But these increments of profit were relatively low. Since the higher titles commonly needed to ensure respect for village leaders required increasingly higher fees and expenses, women’s low profits restricted their access to villagewide leadership. Almost all of those who took the higher titles were men, and most of the leaders in villagewide discussions and decisions were men (Green 1947: 169; Uchendu 1965: 41).

Women, therefore, came out as second-class citizens. Though status and the political influence it could bring were “achieved,” and

* I rely here chiefly on Uchendu 1965 and personal conversations with an Igbo born in Umu-Domi village of Onicha clan, Akpko division. Some of the ideas about leadership were suggested by Schuar 1972. His discussion of what “humanly meaningful authority” would look like is very suggestive for studies of leadership in “developing” societies.
though there were no formal limits to women's political power, men by their ascriptive status (membership in the patrilineage) acquired wealth that gave them a head start and a lifelong advantage over women. The Igbo say that "a child who washes his hands clean deserves to eat with his elders" (Uchendu 1965: 19). What they do not say is that at birth some children are given water and some are not.

Women's Political Institutions

Though women's associations are best described for the south—the area of the Women's War—their existence is reported for most other areas of Igboland, and Forde and Jones made the general observation that "women's associations express their disapproval and secure their demands by collective public demonstrations, including ridicule, satirical singing and dancing, and group strikes" (1950: 21).

Two sorts of women's associations are relevant politically: those of the inyemedi (wives of a lineage) and of the umuada (daughters of a lineage). Since traditional Igbo society was predominantly patrilocally and exogamous, almost all adult women in a village would be wives (there would also probably be some divorced or widowed "daughters" who had returned home to live). Women of the same natal village or village group (and therefore of the same lineage) might marry far and wide, but they would come together periodically in meetings often called ogbo (an Igbo word for "gathering"). The umuada's most important ritual function was at funerals of lineage members, since no one could have a proper funeral without their voluntary ritual participation—a fact that gave women a significant measure of power. The umuada invoked this power in helping to settle intralineage disputes among their "brothers," as well as disputes between their natal and marital lineages. Since these gatherings were held in rotation among the villages into which members had married, they formed an important part of the communication network of Igbo women (Okonjo 1974: 25; Olika 1971: 24-27; Green 1947: 217-29).

The companion grouping to the umuada was the inyemedi, the wives of the lineage, who came together in village-wide gatherings that during the colonial period came to be called mikiiri or nitiiri (the Igbo version of the English "meeting"). Mikiiri were thus gatherings of women based on common residence rather than on common birth, as in the case of ogbo. The mikiiri appears to have performed the major role in daily self-rule among women and to have articulated women's interests as opposed to those of men. Mikiiri provided women with a forum in which to develop their political talents and with a means for protecting their interests as traders, farmers, wives, and mothers (Green 1947; Leith-Ross 1939; Harris 1940; Okonjo 1974). In mikiiri, women made rules about markets, crops, and livestock that applied to men as well as women; and they exerted pressure to maintain moral norms among women. They heard complaints from wives about mistreatment by husbands, and discussed how to deal with problems they were having with "the men" as a whole. They also made decisions about the rituals addressed to the female aspect of the village's guardian spirit, and about rituals for the protection of the fruitfulness of women and of their farms. If fines for violations or if repeated requests to husbands and elders were ignored, women might "sit on" an offender or go on strike. The latter might involve refusing to cook, to take care of small children, or to have sexual relations with their husbands. Men regarded the mikiiri as legitimate; and the use of the more extreme sanctions—though rare—was well remembered.

Though both ogbo and mikiiri served to articulate and protect women's interests, it is probably more accurate to see these groups as sharing in diffused political authority than to see them as acting only as pressure groups for women's interests. Okonjo argues elsewhere in this volume that traditional Igbo society had a "dual-sex political system"; that is, there was a dual system of male and female political-religious institutions, each sex having both its own autonomous sphere of authority and an area of shared responsibilities. Thus, women settled disputes among women, but also made decisions and rules affecting men. They had the right to enforce their decisions and rules by using forms of group ostracism.
similar to those used by men. In a society of such diffuse political authority, it would be misleading to call only a village assembly of men a "public" gathering, as most Western observers unquestioningly do; among the Igbo, a gathering of adult women must also be accepted as a public gathering.

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 ten years passed 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 that violated the autonomy of villages by lumping together many unrelated villages. British District Officers were to preside over the courts, but they were not always present because 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 also constituted what was called the Native Authority. The Warrant Chiefs were required to see that the orders of the District Officers were executed in their own villages, and they were the only link between the colonial power and the people (Afigbo 1972: 13-36, 207-48).

In the first place, it was a violation of Igbo concepts to have one man represent the village; and it was even 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, opportunist young men who put themselves forward as friends of the conquerors. Even where the Warrant Chief was not corrupt, he was still, more than anything else, an agent of the British. The people avoided using Native Courts when they could do so, but Warrant Chiefs could force cases into the Native Courts and fine people for infractions of rules. Because he had the ear of the British, the Warrant Chief himself could violate traditions and even British rules and get away with it (Anene 1967: 259; Meek 1957: 328-30).

Women suffered particularly under the arbitrary rule of Warrant Chiefs, who reportedly took women to marry without allowing them the customary right to refuse a particular suitor. They also helped themselves to the women's agricultural produce and domestic animals (Onwuteaka 1965: 274). 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. An attempt by the British in 1918 to make the Native Courts more "native" by abolishing the District Officers' role as presiding court officials had little effect, and that mostly bad. Removing the District Officers from the courts simply left more power in the hands of corrupt Warrant Chiefs and the increasingly powerful Court Clerks. The latter, intended to be "servants of the court," were able in some cases to dominate the courts because of their monopoly of expertise—namely, literacy (Meek 1957: 329; Gailey 1970: 66-74).

The Women's War

In 1925, the British decided to introduce direct taxation in order to create the Native Treasury, which was supposed to pay for improvements in the Native Administration, in accordance with the British imperial philosophy that the colonized should pay the costs of colonization. Prices in the palm trade were high, and the tax—on adult males—was set accordingly. Taxes were collected without widespread trouble, although there were "tax riots" in Warri Province (west of the Niger) in 1927.

In 1929, a zealous Assistant District Officer in Bende division of Owerri Province, apparently acting on his own initiative, decided to "tighten up" the census registers by recounting households and property. He told the Chiefs that there was no plan to increase
taxes or to tax women. But the counting of women and their property raised fears that women were to be taxed, particularly because the Bende District Officer had lied earlier when the men were counted and had told the men that they were not going to be taxed. The women, therefore, naturally did not believe these reassurances. The taxation rumor spread quickly through the women's communication networks, and meetings of women took place in various market squares, which were the common places for women to have large meetings. In the Olokpo Native Court Area—one of the areas of deception about the men's tax—the women leaders, Ikonna, Nwannedia, and Nvugo, called a general meeting at Oriek market. Here it was decided that as long as men were approached in a compound and asked for information the women would do nothing. If any woman was approached, she was to raise the alarm; then the women would meet again to decide what to do. But they wanted clear evidence that women were to be taxed (Afigbo 1972; Gailey 1970: 107-8).

On November 29, an agent of the Olokpo Warrant Chief, Okugo, entered a compound and told one of the married women, Nwanyeruwa, to count her goats and sheep. She replied angrily, "Was your mother counted?" at which "they closed, seizing each other by the throat" (Perham 1937: 207). Nwanyeruwa's report to the Olokpo women convinced them that they were to be taxed. Messengers were sent to neighboring areas, and women streamed into Olokpo from all over Owerri Province. They "sat on" Okugo and demanded his cap of office. They massed in protest at the District Office and succeeded in getting written assurances that they were not to be taxed. After several days of mass protest meetings, they also succeeded in getting Okugo arrested, tried, and convicted of "spreading news likely to cause alarm" and of physical assault on the women. He was sentenced to two years' imprisonment (Gailey 1970: 108-13).

News of this victory spread rapidly through the market-mikiri network, and women in many areas then attempted to get rid of their Warrant Chiefs and the Native Administration itself. Nwanyeruwa became something of a heroine as reports of her resistance spread. Money poured in from grateful women from villages scattered over a wide area but linked by kinship to Nwanyeruwa's marital village. Nwanyeruwa herself, however, was "content to allow" leadership in her area to be exercised by someone else. The money collected was used not for her but for delegates going to meetings of women throughout southern Igboland to coordinate the Women's War.

The British ended the rebellion only by using large numbers of police and soldiers—and, on one occasion, Boy Scouts. Although the shootings in mid-December and the growing numbers of police and soldiers in the area led the women to halt most of their activities, disturbances continued into 1950. The "disaffected areas"—all of Owerri and Calabar provinces—were occupied by government forces. Punitive expeditions burned or demolished compounds, took provisions from the villages to feed the troops, and confiscated property in payment of fines levied arbitrarily against villages in retribution for damages (Gailey 1970: 135-37).

During the investigations that followed the Women's War, the British discovered the communication network that had been used to spread the rumor of taxation. But that did not lead them to inquire further into how it came to pass that Igbo women had engaged in concerted action under grassroots leadership, had agreed on demands, and had materialized by the thousands at Native Administration centers dressed and adorned in the same unusual way—all wearing short loincloths, all carrying sticks wreathed with palm fronds, and all having their faces smeared with charcoal or ashes and their heads bound with young ferns. Unknown to the British, this was the dress and adornment signifying "war," the sticks being used to invoke the power of the female ancestors (Harris 1940: 143-45, 147-48; Perham 1937: 207ff; Meek 1957: 18).

The report of the Commission of Enquiry exonerating the soldiers who fired on the women cited 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 "surpris-
ing”; but then the British did not understand that the women were engaged in a traditional practice with traditional rules and limitations, only carried out in this instance on a much larger scale than in precolonial times.*

Reforms—But Not for Women

The British failure to recognize the Women’s War as a collective response to the abrogation of rights resulted in a failure to ask whether women might have had a role in the traditional political system that should be incorporated into the institutions of colonial government. Because the women—and the men—regarded the investigations as attempts to discover whom to punish, they volunteered no information about women’s organizations. But would the British have understood those organizations if they had? The discovery of the market network had suggested no further lines of inquiry. The majority of District Officers thought that the men had organized the women’s actions and were secretly directing them. The women’s demands that the Native Courts no longer hear cases and that “all white men should go to their own country”—or at least that women should serve on the Native Courts and a woman be appointed a District Officer—were in line with the power of women in traditional Igbo society but were regarded by the British as irrational and ridiculous (Gailey 1970: 190ff; Leith-Ross 1939: 165; Perham 1937: 105ff).

The reforms instituted in 1939 therefore ignored the women’s traditional political role, though they did make some adjustments to traditional Igbo male and male-dominated political forms. The number of Native Court Areas was greatly increased, and their boundaries were arranged to conform roughly to traditional di-

* A few older men criticized the women for “slinging sand at their chiefs,” but Igbo men generally supported the women though they nonetheless considered it “their fight” against the British. It is also reported that both women and men shared the mistaken belief that the women would not be fired upon because they had observed certain rituals and were carrying the palm-wrapped sticks that invoked the power of the female ancestors. The men had no illusions of immunity for themselves, having vivid memories of the slaughter of Igbo men during the conquest (Perham 1937: 218ff; Anene 1967: 207-224; Esike 1965: 11; Meck 1967: 2).

visions. Warrant Chiefs were replaced by “massed benches,” which allowed 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. Though this benefited the women by eliminating the corruption of the Warrant Chiefs, and thus made their persons and property more secure, it provided no outlet for collective action, their real base of power (Perham 1937: 305ff).

In 1901 the British had declared all jural institutions except the Native Courts illegitimate, but it was only in the years following the 1939 reforms that Native Administration local government became effective enough to make that declaration at all meaningful. The British had also outlawed “self-help”—the use of force by anyone but the government to punish wrongdoers. And the increasingly effective enforcement of this ban eliminated the women’s ultimate weapon: “sitting on a man.” 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 no place for group solidarity, no possibility of dispersed and shared political authority or power of enforcement, and thus very little place for women (Leith-Ross 1939: 195-196, 214). As in the village assemblies, women could not compete with men for leadership in the reformed Native Administration because they lacked the requisite resources. This imbalance in resources was increased by other facets of British colonialism—economic “penetration” and missionary influence. All three—colonial government, foreign investment, and the church—contributed to the growth of a system of political and economic stratification that made community decision-making less “public” in both senses we have discussed and that led to the current concentration of national political power in the hands of a small, educated, wealthy, male elite. For though we are here focusing on the political results of colonialism, they must be seen as part of the whole system of imposed class and sex stratification.*

* Leith Mullings, in her paper “Women and Economic Change in Africa” elsewhere in this volume, has criticized my article “Sitting on a Man” (Van Allen 1977) and my arguments there about systems of stratification. Her comments have helped push me to relate the economic effects of colonialism to its
Missionary Influence

Christian missions were established in Igboland in the late nineteenth century. They had few converts at first, but by the 1930s their influence was significant, though generally limited to the young (Leith-Ross 1939: 109–18; Meek 1957: xv). A majority of Igbo eventually "became Christians," for they had to profess Christianity in order to attend mission schools. 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 meetings where traditional rituals were performed or where money was collected for the rituals, which in effect meant all *mikiri*, *ogbo*, and many other types of gatherings (Ajayi 1965: 108–9).

Probably more significant, since *mikiri* were losing some of their political functions anyway, was mission education. The Igbo came to see English and Western education 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 had. Boys were more often sent to school than girls, for a variety of reasons generally related to their favored position in the patri-lineage, including the fact that they, not their sisters, would be expected to support their parents in their old age. 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" that 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 for Christian marriage and motherhood, not for jobs or for citizenship. 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 they needed Christian families. Therefore, Christian wives and mothers, not female political leaders, were 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." As the English language and other knowledge of "book" became necessary to political life, women were increasingly cut out and policy-making became less public.

Economic Colonialism

The traditional Igbo division of labor—in which women owned their surplus crops and their market profits, while men controlled the more valuable yams and palm products and did more long-distance trading—was based on a subsistence economy. Small surpluses could be accumulated, but these were generally not used for continued capital investment. Rather, in accord with traditional values, the surplus was used for social rather than economic gain: it was returned to the community through fees and feasts for rituals for title-taking, weddings, funerals, and other ceremonies, or through projects to help the community "get up." One became a "big man" or a "big woman" not by hoarding one's wealth but by spending it on others in prestige-winning ways (Uchendu 1965: 34; Meek 1957: 111).

Before the Pax Britannica, Igbo women had been active traders in all but a few areas (one such was Afikpo, where women farmed but did not trade).† The ties of exogamous marriage among patri-

* For the missionaries' views and purposes, see Ajayi 1965, Baden 1927, Buliffant 1950, Marshall 1966, and Livingstone n.d.
† It is an unfortunate accident that the Afikpo Igbo, with their strong sexual stratification, have been used as examples of "the Igbo" or of "the effect of colonialism on women" in widely read articles. Simon Ottenberg's "Ibo Receptivity to Change" is particularly misleading, since it is about "all" Igbo. There is one specific mention of women: "The social and economic independence of women is much greater in some areas than in others." True, but the social and economic independence of women is much greater in virtually all other Igbo groups than it is in Afikpo, where the Ottenbergs did fieldwork. There are said to be "a variety of judicial techniques" used, but all the examples given are of men's activities. There is a list of non-kinship organizations, but no women's organizations are listed. Sanday's otherwise useful and thought-provoking article (1972) both takes the Afikpo as "the" Igbo and exaggerates the

political effects in an explicit way. I remain convinced, however, that ideology and consciousness should be treated as independent factors that can directly influence the form of economic and political developments, and that can be changed directly by "consciousness-raising" as well as indirectly by changes in economic structures.
lineages, the cross-cutting networks of women providing channels for communication and conciliation, and the ritual power of female members of patrilineages all enabled the traditional system to deal with conflicts with relatively little warfare (Anene 1967: 214ff; Green 1947: 91, 152, 177, 250–52). Conflict also took the nonviolent form of mutual insults in obscene and satirical songs (Nwoga 1971: 33–35, 40–42); and even warfare itself was conducted within limits, with weapons and actions increasing in seriousness in inverse proportion to the closeness of kinship ties. Women from mutually hostile village groups who had married into the same patrilineage could if necessary act as “protectors” for each other so that they could trade in “stranger” markets (Green 1947: 151). Women also protected themselves by carrying the stout sticks they used as pestles for pounding yams (the same ones carried in the Women’s War). Even after European slave-trading led to an increase in danger from slave-hunters (as well as from head hunters), Igbo women went by themselves to their farms and with other women to market, with their pestles as weapons for physical protection (Esike 1965: 19).

The Pax increased the safety of short- and especially of long distance trading for Igbo women as for women in other parts of Africa. But the Pax also made it possible for European firms to dominate the market economy. Onwuteaka argues that one cause of the Women’s War was Igbo women’s resentment of the monopoly British firms had on buying, a monopoly that allowed them to fix prices and adopt methods of buying that increased their own profits at the women’s expense (1965: 278). Women’s petty trading grew to include European products, but for many women the accumulated surplus remained small, often providing only subsistence and a few years’ school fees for some of their chil-

dren—the preference for sending boys to school further disadvantaging the next generation of women (Mintz 1971: 251–58; Boserup 1970: 92–95). A few women have become “big traders,” dealing in £1000 lots of European goods, but women traders remain for the most part close to subsistence level. Little is open to West African women in towns except trading, brewing, or prostitution, unless they are among the tiny number who have special vocational or professional training (for example, as dressmakers, nurses, or teachers) (Boserup 1970: 85–101, 106–98). The “modern” economic sector, like the “modern” political sector, is dominated by men, women’s access being limited “by their low level of literacy and by the general tendency to give priority to men in employment recruitment to the modern sector” (Boserup 1970: 99).

Women outside urban areas—the great majority of women—find themselves feeding their children by farming with their traditional digging sticks while men are moving into cash-cropping (with tools and training from “agricultural development programs”), migrant wage-labor, and trading with Europeans (Boserup 1970: 53–61, 87–99; Mintz 1971: 248–51). Thus, as Mintz suggests, “while the economic growth advanced by Westernization has doubtless increased opportunities for (at least some) female traders, it may also and simultaneously limit the range of their activities, as economic changes outside the internal market system continue to multiply” (p. 265). To the extent that economic opportunities for Africans in the “modern” sector continue to grow, women will become relatively more dependent economically on men and will be unlikely to “catch up” for a very long time, even if we accept education as the key. The relative stagnation of African economic “growth,” however, suggests that the traditional markets will not disappear or even noticeably shrink, but will continue to be needed by the large numbers of urban migrants living economically marginal lives. Women can thus continue to subsist by petty trading, though they cannot achieve real economic independence from men or gain access to the resources needed for equal participation in community life.

It seems reasonable to see the traditional Igbo division of labor

amount of change in female status that female trading brought about. Phoebe Ottenberg, Sanday’s ultimate source on Afioko women, described the change in female status as existing “chiefly on the domestic rather than the general level,” with the “men’s position of religious, moral, and legal authority ... in no way threatened” (1990: 229). For examples of precolonial female trading in Igboland and elsewhere, see Little 1975 (particularly p. 46, n. 93); Uchendu 1965; Van Allen 1974b: 5–9; Dike 1956; and Jones 1993.
in production as interwoven with the traditional Igbo dispersal of political authority into a dual or "dual-sex" system. It seems equally reasonable to see the disruptions of colonialism as producing a new, similarly interwoven economic-political pattern—but one with stronger male domination of the cash economy and of political life.

To see this relationship, however, is not to explain it. Even if the exclusion of women from the colonial Native Administration and from nationalist politics could be shown to derive from their exclusion from the "modern" economic sector, we would still need to ask why it was men who were offered agricultural training and new tools for cash-cropping, and who are hired in factories and shops in preference to women with the same education. And we would still need to ask why it was chiefly boys who were sent to school, and why their education differed from that provided for girls.

Victorianism and Women's Invisibility

At least part of the answer must lie in the values of the colonialists, values that led the British to assume that girls and boys, women and men, should be treated and should behave as people supposedly did in "civilized" Victorian England. Strong male domination was imposed on Igbo society both indirectly, by new economic structures, and directly, by the recruitment of only men into the Native Administration. In addition, the new economic and political structures were supported by the inculcation of sexist ideology in the mission schools.

Not all capitalist, colonialist societies are equally sexist (or racist); but the Victorian society from which the conquerors of Igboland came was one in which the ideology that a woman's place is in the home had hardened into the most rigid form it has taken in recent Western history. Although attacked by feminists, that ideology remained dominant throughout the colonial period and is far from dead today. The ideal of Victorian womanhood—attainable, of course, only by the middle and upper classes, 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.* A woman who showed talent in these areas did not challenge any ideas about typical women: the exceptional woman simply had "the brain of a man," as Sir George Goldie said of Mary Kingsley (Gwynn 1932: 252).† 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 a preliminary reading of biographies, autobiographies, journals, and "reminiscences," plus the evidence of statements about Igbo women at the time of the Women's War, strongly suggests that the colonialists were deflected from any attempt to discover or protect Igbo women's political and economic roles by their assumption that politics and business were not proper, normal places for women.‡

When Igbo women forced the colonial administrators to recognize their presence during the Women's War, their brief "visibility" was insufficient to shake these assumptions. Their behavior was simply seen as aberrant and inexplicable. When they returned to "normal," they were once again invisible. This inability to "see" what is before one's eyes is strikingly illustrated by an account of a visit by the High Commissioner, Sir Ralph Moor, to Aro Chukwu after the British had destroyed (temporarily) the powerful oracle there. "To Sir Ralph's astonishment, the women of Aro Chukwu solicited his permission to reestablish the Long Jiju, which the women intended to control themselves" (Anene 1967: 934). Would the fact that Englishwomen of the "lower classes" had to work in the fields in the mills, in the mines, or on the street did not stop the colonialists from carrying their ideal to Africa, or from condemning urban prostitution there (just as they did at home) without acknowledging their contribution to its origin or continuation.

† Mary Kingsley, along with other elite female "exceptions" who influenced Victorian colonial policy (e.g., Flora Shaw Lugard and Margery Perham), held the same values that men did, at least in regard to women's roles. They did not expect ordinary women to have political power any more than men expected them to, and they showed no particular concern for African women.

‡ For examples of this attitude among those who were not missionaries, see Anene 1967: 929-934; Crocker 1936; Meek 1957; Kingsley 1897; Perham 1965; and Wood 1960.
Sir Ralph have been “astonished” if, for example, the older men had controlled the oracle before its destruction and the younger men had wanted to take it over.

The feminist movement in England during the colonial era did not succeed in making the absence of women from public life noted as a problem that required a remedy. The movement did not succeed 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. That we have not wondered is an indication of our own ideological bondage to a system of sex and class stratification. What we can see, if we look, is that Igbo men have come to dominate women economically and politically; individual women have become economic auxiliaries to their husbands, and women’s groups have become political auxiliaries to nationalist parties. Wives supplement their husbands’ incomes but remain economically dependent; women’s “branches” have provided votes, money, and participants in street demonstrations for political parties but remain dependent on male leaders for policymaking. Women’s associations were a vital base of support for the early National Council for Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC), the party that eventually was to become dominant in Igbo regions (although it began as a truly national party). And though a few market-women leaders were ultimately rewarded for their loyalty to the NCNC by appointment to party or legislative positions, market women’s associations never attained a share in policymaking that approached their contribution to NCNC electoral success (Bretton 1966: 61; MacIntosh 1966: 299, 304–9; Sklar 1965: 41–85, 251, 402). The NCNC at first had urged female suffrage throughout the country, an idea opposed by the Northern People’s Congress (NPC), dominated by Moslem emirs. Soon, however, the male NCNC leadership gave up pushing for female suffrage in the north (where women have never yet voted) in order to make peace with the NPC and the British and thus insure for themselves a share of power in the postindependence government. During the period between independence in 1960 and the 1966 military coups that ended party rule, some progress was made in education for girls. By 1966, consequently, female literacy in the East was more than 50 percent in some urban areas and at least 15 percent overall—high for Africa, where the overall average is about 10 percent and the rural average may be as low as 2 percent (MacIntosh 1966: 17–37; West African Pilot, April 29, 1959; Pool 1972: 238; UNESCO 1968).

Exhortations to greater female participation in “modern life” appeared frequently in the newspapers owned by the NCNC leader, Nnamdi Azikiwe, and a leadership training course for women was begun in 1959 at the Man O’ War Bay Training Centre, to be “run on exactly the same lines as the courses for men, with slight modifications,” as the Pilot put it. The motto of the first class of 22 women was, “What the men can do, the women can” (Van Allen 1974b: 17–20). But there was more rhetoric than reality in these programs for female emancipation. During the period of party politics, no women were elected to regional or national legislatures; those few who were appointed gained favor by supporting “party first,” not “women first.” Perhaps none of this should be surprising, given the corruption that had come to dominate national party politics (MacIntosh 1966: 299, 612–14; Sklar 1963: 402; Van Allen 1974b: 19–22).

*Biafra and Beyond*

On January 15, 1966, a military coup ended the Igbo’s relationship with the NCNC: all women were outlawed. A year and a half later—after the massacres of more than 30,000 Easterners in the North, the flight of more than a million refugees back to the East, a counter-coup, and the division of the Igbo-dominated Eastern Region into three states—Biafra declared herself an independent state. In January 1970 she surrendered; the remaining Igbo are now landlocked, oilless, and under military occupation by a Northern-dominated
military government. Igbo women demonstrated in the streets to protest the massacres, to urge secession, and, later, to protest Soviet involvement in the war (Ojukwu 1969: 91, 143, 145-46, 245). During the war, the women’s market network and other women’s organizations maintained a distribution system for what food was and provided channels for the passage of food and information to the army (Uzoma 1974: 8ff; Akpan 1971: 65-67, 89, 98-99, 128-30). Women joined local civilian-defense militia units and in May 1969 formed a “Women’s Front” and called on the Biafran leadership to allow them to enlist in the infantry (Uzoma 1974: 5-8; Ojukwu 1969: 386).

During and after the war, local civilian government continued to exist more or less in the form that evolved under the “reformed” Native Administration. The decentralization produced by the war has by some reports strengthened these local councils, and the absence of many men has strengthened female participation (Peters 1971: 102-3; Adler 1969: 112; Uzoma 1974: 10-12). Thus, at tragic human cost, the war may have made possible a resurgence of female political activity. If this is so, women’s participation again stems much more from Igbo tradition than from Western innovation.

It remains to be seen whether Igbo women, or any African women, can gain real political power without the creation of a “modern” version of the traditional “dual-sex” system (which is what Okonjo argues is needed) or without a drastic change in economic structures so that economic equality could support political equality for all women and men, just as economic stratification now supports male domination and female dependence. What seems clear from women’s experiences—whether under capitalism, co-

* The attitude of the Northern emirs who now again dominate the Nigerian government is perhaps indicated by their order in June 1973 that single women get married or leave Northern Nigeria because Moslem religious authorities had decided that the North African drought was caused by prostitution and immorality. Landlords were ordered not to let rooms to single women, and many unmarried women were reported to have fled their home areas (Agence France Presse, as reported in The San Francisco Chronicle, June 23, 1973). In late 1973 the military government appointed a 50-man body to draft a constitution for Nigeria’s return to civilian rule. As of this writing women’s protests have produced no changes in its membership.