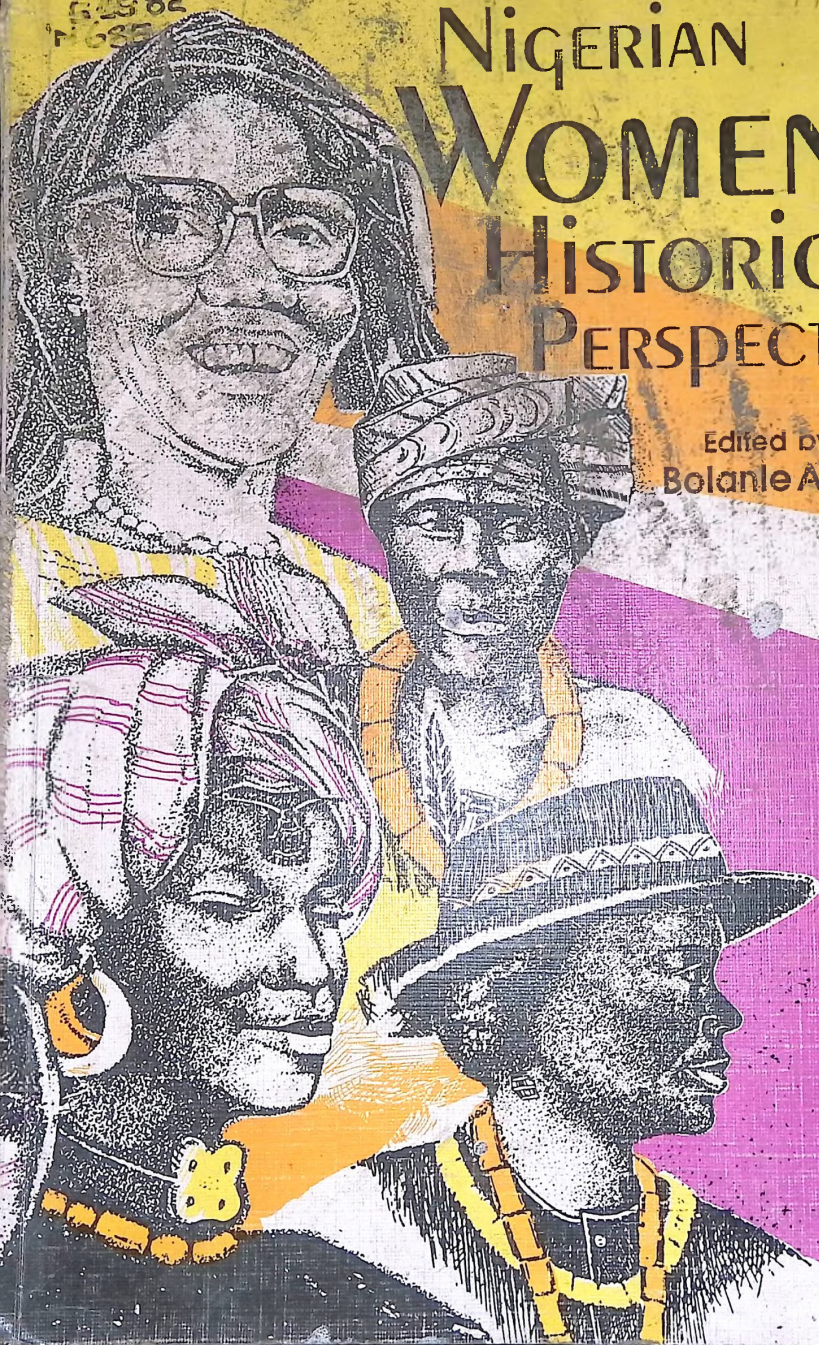


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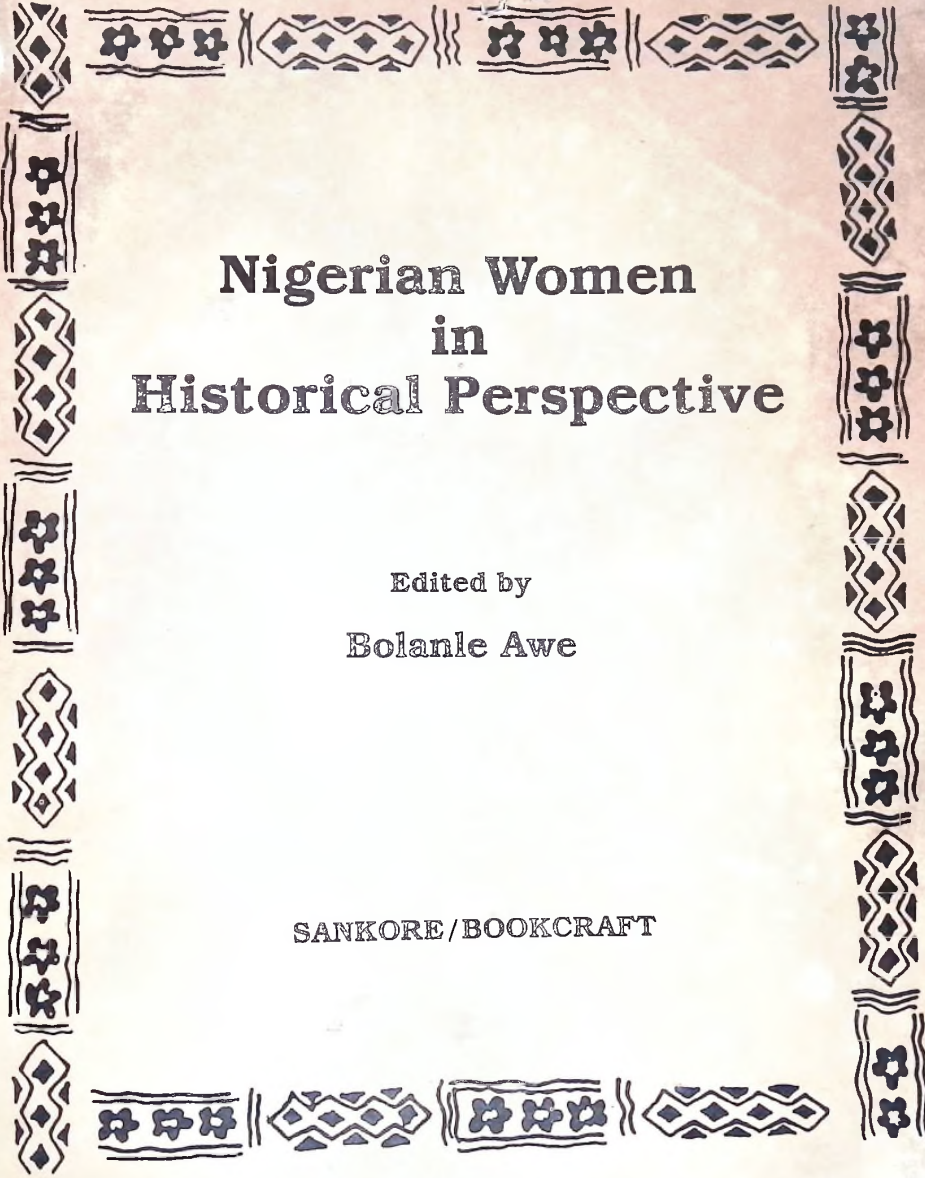
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NIGERIAN WOMEN in Historical Perspective

Edited by
Bolanle Awe



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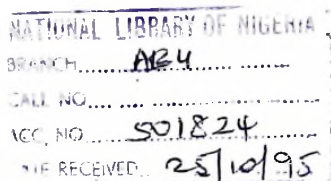
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Introduction



This collection of essays has a very long history. It is a story that needs to be told in order to shed more light on the predicament of the Nigerian woman in trying to gain recognition in her society. The writing of these essays was mooted in the early 1970s, before Women's Studies became a legitimate pursuit of the Nigerian academic. The effort to get them published has been a tortuous one, and in its own way epitomizes the struggles of Nigerian women to achieve acknowledged status in various sectors in the country.

First attempts to get the essays published locally met with failure. Publisher after publisher declined to take on the manuscript because they decided that the time was not ripe for the publication of a book on Nigerian women and that such a book would not have much market value. No Ministry of Education would, at that time, adopt it as a textbook for schools. Attempts to publish abroad were also not successful. Overseas publishers raised queries which would have necessitated a veering away from the initial orientation and a drastic revision of the essays. This would have spelt the death of the project as most of the contributors had taken on new responsibilities in new locations and would have had difficulties in starting the exercise anew.

However, within the last few years, local publishers have shown a new interest in publishing books on women. The study of women's history and their contribution to the development of their society has gained recognition as a genuine and significant area of study and therefore worthy of its own literature. Previously, the role of women in African history had been virtually neglected. Most writings on the African past tended to concentrate on the spectacular achievements of men and glossed over the contributions of women. There had been no serious attempt to study closely oral traditions — the main source of African history — with a view to eliciting information about women. Indeed the most popular oral traditions have concentrated on war and the battlefield, that is, those areas where men predominated and exercised authority. The colonial administration also paid scant attention to the role of women, except in times of crisis, such as the Women's War of 1929. In addition, colonialism helped to obliterate whatever records of women's achievements there were by giving little recognition to repositories of such information. Thus the task of piecing together women's history has been difficult. So acute is the dearth of information, particularly documentary

evidence, that some of the outstanding women in history have been mistaken for men and their achievements, attributed to male rulers!

The last sixteen years, however, have witnessed all over the world a new interest in the role of women in society. The United Nations Decade for all Women (1975-1985), provided a great stimulus in this direction, and African women have not been left out. In Nigeria a number of seminars, conferences and workshops on the role of women in the Nigerian society were held during that period. There were also significant publications on Nigerian women by Bolanle Awe, Kamene Okonjo, Nina Mba, Laray Denzer, Cheryl Johnson, Kristin Mann and others.

The interest of the military administration in promoting female participation in development is particularly significant. It began with the appointment of women, albeit token figures, to various policy-making bodies from 1976. More recently, it has demonstrated its commitment by the introduction in 1987 of the Better Life Programme for Rural Women and the setting up in 1990 of the National Commission for Women. These efforts on the part of the government, as well as the activities of the increasing number of women's organisations, have given a new impetus to the study of women.

Indeed the study of the role of Nigerian women, as of other African women, has become urgent; for in spite of the significant strides highlighted above, women still seem not to be playing a crucial role in the development process. The African continent has undergone many historical experiences, each of which has left its mark on the position of African women in their societies and on their ability to contribute to these societies. In the process, women have become increasingly marginalised. An examination of women's activities in historical perspective therefore provides one useful avenue for an understanding of the possibilities of their involvement in modern development.

In this historical reconstruction, life histories of African women are illuminating and can be approached in different ways. They could be autobiographical, biographical or a mixture of both. Apart from the pioneering study of *Baba of Karo: A Woman of the Hausa*, edited by Mary F. Smith in 1954, and works like "Madam Yako: Ruler of the Kpa Mende Confederacy" written by Carol P. Hoffer in *Woman, Culture and Society*, edited by M. Rosaldo and L. Lamphere (1973) others have recently come on the scene. Patricia Romero edited a volume of *Life Histories of African Women* (eight in all) 1988, and Sarah Mirza and Margaret Strobel edited another volume *Three Swahili Women, Life Histories* in 1989. Nearer home in Nigeria, there have been published the biographies of Lady Oyinkan Abayomi, *A Lady by Folarin Coker*, 1987 and Mrs. Kofoworola Pratt, *An African Florence Nightingale*, by J.A. Akinsanya, 1987 and *Madam Tinubu*, by Oladipo Yemitan (1987). Biographical writing is an interesting and effective way of comprehending the situation of women in the past.

Biographies yield important insights about individuals, societies and historical processes. Studies of the lives of some of the leading historical

female figures add to the picture of those societies and illuminate their positions in them. They throw light on the strains and stresses to which women were subjected, the options open to them and the strategies which they developed, living within male-dominated societies. Moreover such women who have played positive roles in their societies will serve as role models to motivate girls and women as they strive to be effective participants in the development process. A study of their lives will also provide African societies with a chance to reappraise the positions of their womenfolk. And such outstanding women have never been a rarity in these societies.

A close look at any African society will reveal overwhelming evidence of the contributions which women have made in the past. Most African oral traditions, surviving religious cults, and extant political institutions still attest to the significant position which women occupied in the social, economic, and political evolution of different African communities. Such evidence also shows conclusively that theirs was not merely a passive and supportive role, but was also dynamic and constructive. Indeed it has been suggested that an analysis of the leading figures of pre-twentieth century Africa will show that there were more women than men in the forefront of social, political and economic life, than in contemporary Africa, and that during that period, the dominant position which the women held was both quantitative and qualitative. Thus what was conceived originally as simple biographies of Nigerian heroines metamorphosed into a study of Nigerian Women in Historical Perspective.

Nigeria provides a good starting point for this investigation of women's situation in the past. It can boast of a fairly rich source of oral traditions, traditional customs and life-styles as well as eye-witness accounts by visitors to the country within the last one hundred and fifty years. All these records give ample evidence of a female population that has not only been industrious and resourceful, but which has also demonstrated significant and distinguished leadership within the society. The ubiquitous market women and the energetic women farmers are pointers to their economic role. The continued existence of women chiefs in many traditional councils and of priestesses in many indigenous cults is a testimony to their contribution in political and social spheres. However, the writing of such biographies poses its own difficult challenges in view of the dearth of information.

All the contributors to this volume, except one, Felicia Ekejiuba, a social anthropologist, who is however very conscious of the pertinence of history, are historians. Their contributions have been offshoots from larger works in their own specialised fields. Their approach is essentially historical. They have tried to see women's contribution to history within the limits of the social constraints and at various stages of the development of the Nigerian society. As a backdrop to their subjects, they cover broad sweeps of history ranging from the pre-colonial and colonial periods to the independence era, and draw attention to those external

factors that have made an impact on the Nigerian society and on Nigerian women. Each one discusses his/her sources and the efforts made in building up a life portrait of the subject.

By the skilful blending of essentially primary sources such as oral traditions, personal interviews and occasional written evidence — even though these are uneven in quality and quantity for different subjects — the contributors to this volume of biographies have attempted to analyse the kinds of contribution which women have made to the Nigerian society in the past. The emphasis has been largely on individual leadership. This is not to underestimate the contribution of the ordinary women, who, unsung and unknown, quietly toiled on relentlessly in their homes, in the fields, in the market places to sustain their society. Efforts are being made by the Women's Research and Documentation Centre of the Institute of African Studies of the University of Ibadan to start an oral history project to document the lives of such women. These are borne out by the inclusion of the chapter on the Heroines of the Women's War which features the collective leadership of simple women at the grassroots so typical of the Igbo/Ibibio society of south-eastern Nigeria. Rather than strike a discordant note, this particular chapter reinforces a point which will be discussed later — the ordinariness of those women who found themselves assuming positions of leadership in their societies.

The present collection, which is the first in the series, does not, however, claim to exhaust the list of such distinguished women in Nigerian history. The emphasis however, is on those who are no longer living. It was only after Mrs Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti and Lady Oyinkan Abayomi died that we decided to include them in this collection. Some of the more popular figures, about whom much has been written, such as Madam Tinubu of Abeokuta and Lagos fame; Emotan and Queen Idia, both of Benin, have however, not been included.

Their omission has been deliberate; it is designed to emphasize that those women were not rare characters and that throughout most of Nigeria's known history, other women of similar stature have been present.

Although this volume selects only a few women for treatment, nevertheless, it attempts to cover a wide spectrum of human situations to show the female predicament and how women fared in the various spheres in which they operated. The legends of Inkpi, Moremi and Daura highlight the place of women in our myths of origin and present them as playing the role of saviours in times of crisis. Queen Amina, Queen Kambasa, Iyalode Efunsetan, the Heroines of the Women's War, Mrs Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti and Adunni Oluwole each operated largely within a specific political context, except that the exercise of political power was a complex matter. Only in the cases of Queen Kambasa and Queen Amina do we find women vested with full sovereignty and placed at the summit of a social hierarchy. However, Omu Okwei and Iyalode Efunsetan occupied the highest rank open to women and at great cost to themselves,

participated, with a high degree of success, in the exercise of power. This traditional system which gave women the chance to have a say in matters that affected their lives, particularly in the public domain, was disrupted during the colonial era and the power then lost has never been fully regained. The effort to recover some of this authority gave rise to the emergence of figures like the Heroines of the Women's War among the Igbo and Ibibio, and Mrs Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti and Adunni Oluwole among the Yoruba. The former exploited the political strength of their traditional associations to emphasize the need for full consultation with them in any decision-making process. The experience of Mrs Ransome-Kuti, Mrs Oluwole and of a different order, that of Lady Oyinkan Abayomi, provides insight into the problems of women's participation in politics and the resources available to them within the context of the modern political machinery.

Mrs Obasa, and Lady Oyinkan Abayomi, also products of the colonial era, highlight the position of women's education during this era. As in their case, the few women who were privileged to enjoy Christian, Western-type education were trained not to become part of the labour force but to provide men with effective support as mothers, wives and good hostesses. It was this policy which was largely responsible for the lack of women in the professions and on the higher rungs of the civil service until recently. Therefore, women with initiative and drive like Mrs Obasa and Lady Oyinkan Abayomi found outlets for their energies primarily in philanthropic social welfare work and civic activities.

European contact also led to the development of international commerce. In most parts of Nigeria, trade has traditionally been an important activity for both rural and urban women and they were not left out of this new international trade. The lives of Iyalode Efunsetan and Omu Okwei demonstrate the effects of the economic power which they built up through this trade on their family relationships and their social and political influence.

The life of Nana Asma'u introduces another dimension to these biographical studies. In many parts of Nigeria, Islam predominates and its effects on the contribution which women can make to their society has often been a matter for debate. The important role which Asma'u, a daughter of a famous religious leader and Jihadist, Uthman dan Fodio, played in the development of the Sokoto Caliphate is a pointer to the fact that Islam did not necessarily inhibit women's contribution to their society. Asma'u was a woman of many parts, but the focus in this biography has been on her contribution to scholarship within the Caliphate. Through her writings, she provides a good example of the intellectual efforts of the Muslim sisterhood whose learning has earned them recognition in Muslim intellectual circles.

Another striking feature about the women in this volume is the fact that they are not confined to only one geographical area or to a particular group of people in Nigeria. In the history of every group that now people

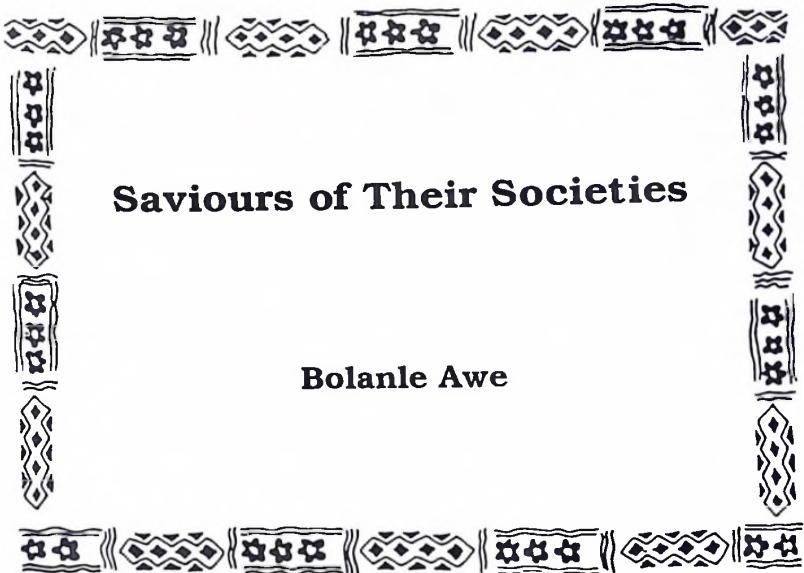
Nigeria, there have been women who have demonstrated qualities of leadership. Indeed the choice of the women portrayed in this volume has been made in such a way as to underline the fact that no one group of people has a monopoly of female leaders. These women come from different parts of the country and represent not only the major groups like the Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba but also minority groups like the Ijaw of the Niger Delta and the Igala of the Niger-Benue confluence.

In spite of their different backgrounds and the different periods of history in which they lived, the available evidence has revealed certain traits that are common to all of them. The picture that has emerged is one of outstanding intellect, courage and industry. They were therefore usually innovators, setting the pace for new developments in their societies. Even those semi-legendary figures — Inkpi, Moremi and Daura — were agents of change in that twilight zone of history. Later on, Iyalode Efunsetan and Omu Okwei also demonstrated their remarkable ability to exploit the opportunities which came with new external influences as they paved innovative and successful paths for themselves in the world of business. On the political plane the Heroines of the Women's War and Mrs Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti also brought about radical changes in the colonial administration of their time.

But in spite of such achievements, virtually all of them had ordinary beginnings. Initially, they led conventional lives. Although some like Lady Oyinkan Abayomi and Mrs Obasa came from privileged backgrounds. Most of them were married and some were blessed with children. They were therefore not too different from the rest of their female contemporaries, with the exception perhaps of the highly unconventional Oluwole. Their societies were mainly patriarchal and male dominated. They operated in a cultural milieu in which women started life with a great handicap and suffered many constraints. Their own distinction lies in the fact that in spite of these disabilities, they also succeeded in making their mark in their societies. The secret of the success of some of these women lies in their courage in rejecting, through their life-styles, the societal constraints which imposed certain types of behaviour on their gender and confined them largely to particular callings in their societies. By breaking loose from these chains of convention, they were able to discover themselves and develop those innate qualities of leadership. Others, of course, like the Heroines of the Women's War who worked within the traditional system, exploited its potential strength to press home their points and won concessions for themselves. In effect those women, through their sheer willpower, industry and ability were able to leave their mark and their societies came to acknowledge and respect their contributions, in some cases, by conferring on them their highest distinctions.

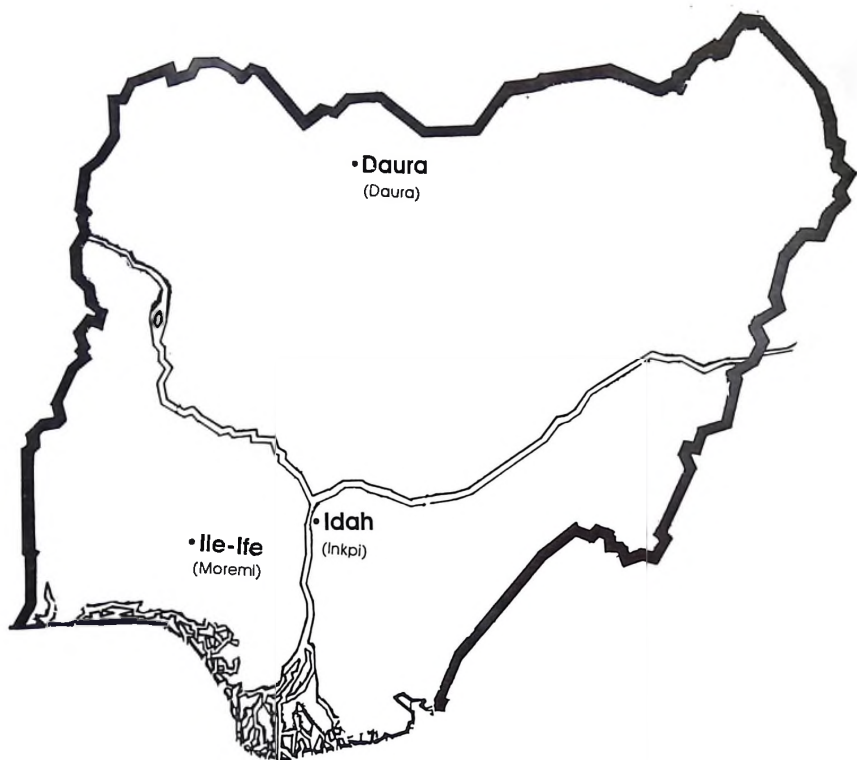
The studies of these famous women therefore raise issues which are pertinent to the development of Nigeria and the effective participation of women therein. The actual records of the activities of these women add

a new and useful dimension to the history of Nigeria. Since these biographies are all written against the background of different stages in Nigerian national development, starting from the dawn of her history, through the pre-colonial era to Independence, the picture that has emerged is one in which not only men but also women played decisive and important roles. One important inference that can be drawn from this is that, in spite of the asymmetrical nature of most Nigerian societies and the inhibiting cultural traditions which dictated the role which women should play, these societies were not positively anti-feminist. They did recognise women's innate ability when it displayed itself and gave it free rein. The immediate corollary to this however, is that women who exercised leadership were those who were not prepared to be cowed by the constraints of a male-dominated society and who demonstrated their courage most effectively by their own achievements. Thus these biographies suggest a pattern for effective female participation in national development for they demonstrate the strength and resourcefulness of Nigerian women in establishing a worthy place for themselves in their own societies. They show quite clearly that the recognition of women's contribution to the society is not going to be conceded to them on a platter of gold. The doors are not going to be thrown open without an effort. Women must struggle for that recognition and prove by their efforts that they deserve it.



Saviours of Their Societies

Bolanle Awe



Throughout the history of the Nigerian people, there have been women of note who made their mark on their different societies. Many of them lived in periods which are comparatively fairly well documented; others are virtually legendary characters who existed in the dim recesses of Nigerian history. This first chapter deals with this latter group. Through the lives of some of these women an attempt will be made to examine the role which women played in those remote times. Attention will be focussed on only three — Inkpi of the Igala, Moremi of the Yoruba and Daura of the Hausa.

It is hoped that these women will serve as examples of the large number of such women to be found in virtually every society within the country. They should also provide an opportunity of studying women in three different geographical areas and distinct ethnic groups. These differences should however not be overemphasized; the common features which they share override the differences and make it possible to discuss them together in one single chapter. For instance, they were all products of centralised societies; they lived in kingdoms where women as queen mothers, royal wives and princesses played an important role in the exercise of royal power. As we shall see, these three women had virtually the same significance for the development of their difference societies.

Traditions surrounding each of them will be examined separately, and in conclusion, the common threads running through their activities will be drawn together to highlight the contributions of women to this early period of history. It is however important at the onset to sound a note of warning. The reconstruction of the activities of these women is not easy because there are many gaps in our knowledge of the beginnings of the Nigerian societies in which they lived. Very often the information which will help to recreate real, live, flesh and blood persons of these women is missing. Dating is also very difficult. In fact, we depend heavily on oral traditions in the form of narrative accounts, enactment ceremonies commemorating their achievements, place names, material artefacts etc. In spite of whatever shortcomings these sources might have, the contributions of these women still shine very fiercely through the available evidence.

Inkpi

Inkpi was a princess of the Igala royal family whose capital base was at

Idah on the River Niger. To understand the significance of her role in Igala history, it is necessary to give some background picture of that history. Much of the information for this account is derived from the publications of Dr. J.S. Boston who did intensive field work among the Igala in the early 1960s.

The Igalas are inhabitants of the Benue/Niger confluence; they now occupy the southern angle of that confluence, but available evidence suggests that, before the nineteenth century, they inhabited the entire triangular tract of territory on the left bank above and below the confluence, for a distance of about ten kilometres. It is difficult to determine how long they have stayed in the area, though it is not unlikely that like other inhabitants of the confluence, their ancestors, had settled there even before the birth of Christ.

Initially, they were not centrally organised; they lived in nine independent and territorially separate groups known as the Igala Mela, each under its own patriarch. Their country like the rest of the area around the Benue/Niger confluence was not, however, isolated. Its geographical position brought it into contact with a wide range of peoples and cultures such as the Igbo, Yoruba, Edo and Jukun who each left their mark on their society.

According to the traditions, the Jukun succeeded in bringing them under their sphere of influence, and were in control till the seventeenth century when the Igala threw off their yoke. It is not unlikely that the leadership in this bid for independence gave rise to the ruling house whose members have since provided the rulers (Ata) of the Igala. The traditions are not clear about the first Ata; some traditions mention a woman, Ebelejonu, whose descendant produced the first Ata; but Ayagba is more often referred to as the founder of the Ata dynasty which succeeded in uniting the nine Igala principalities into one, under its leadership.

In the absence of solid historical evidence, it is possible to assume that the overthrow of the Jukun was a long-drawn struggle. The Jukun would certainly not release their hold on this dependency which was probably a rich source of tribute easily. The Igala however have encapsulated all that struggle in one major episode of their commemorative enactment ceremonies where Ayagba played the key role of leading his people to deliverance. According to Igala traditions, Ayagba challenged Jukun authority during the reign of his father by taking to them insulting gifts (faeces) instead of the traditional annual tribute, and also by cunningly removing the ritual vessel, *Ane*, which was the symbol of Jukun authority. He was reported to have taken the form of a beautiful woman who lured the Jukun prince to hand over the *Ane*. This act amounted to a declaration of Igala independence and their Jukun overlords reacted immediately, by sending an army against the Igala who were now under the leadership of Ayagba who had succeeded his now dead father. They camped beside the River Inachalo, about one and half miles from Idah and laid siege to it.

The Igala were overwhelmed but help soon came in the form of a Muslim priest (sometimes described as a medicine man — Edegi), who advised Ayagba to sacrifice his most-prized possession to save his people. To Ayagba, his most-prized possession were his children and of them all, he loved his princess Inkpi most. He was naturally unwilling to sacrifice her, but Inkpi herself soon released her father from his difficulty by offering to die to save her people; she died in a heroic way by burying herself alive. Edegi then prepared some medicine which was thrown into the Inachalo stream and made it poisonous. The Jukun soldiers drank the water from the stream and many of them died. The rest offered Ayagba only very weak resistance and he was able to rout them easily.

His success brought to an end Jukun overlordship of the Igala; peace was declared and the boundary between the Igala and the Jukun was clearly demarcated. With the removal of the external pressure from the Jukun, Ayagba was able to start the work of internal consolidation and the unification of the nine principalities into what became known as the Igala kingdom.

This was a decisive stage in Igala history, and it is not surprising that the other star player in the drama, Princess Inkpi, has emerged as an outstanding heroine, and the most popular of Igala princesses. In recent times a monument was erected in her honour on the banks of River Idah. But long before the erection of this statue, she had been deified. A shrine was built over the place where she is believed to have buried herself alive. Her role has assumed tremendous ritual significance particularly as regards the relationship between the Ata and the land, home of Igala ancestors. Sometimes the whole episode of the struggle with the Jukun has been interpreted as the attempt to gain sovereignty over land which the Ata only acquired with the sacrifice of his most prized possession; at other times, it is seen as a supreme effort to restore peace and tranquillity to the land which had been spoiled through his neglect by sacrificing his daughter. Hence, Princess Inkpi is associated ritually, not with the royal ancestors but with the land cult. Hers is the concluding episode of the land rites. The Ata, his counsellors, officials, priests and masquerades go to her shrine annually to pray her to bless Idah and the land so that they may know peace and prosperity. She has thus developed into the tutelary goddess of the Igala, watching over their destiny.

Moremi of Ile-Ife

Like Inkpi, Moremi also played a decisive role in the history of her people, the Yoruba. These are the inhabitants of most of south-western Nigeria, Benin and Togo, most of whom regard Ile-Ife in Osun State of Nigeria as their ancestral home. Human settlement in Yorubaland has been long standing; extant oral traditions in fact indicate waves of migration and subsequent settlement by successive groups with Ile-Ife as their base. The establishment of its authority by each successive immigrant group

was not without some resistance from its predecessor. For instance, many re-enactment ceremonies deal with the epic struggle between the Obatala and the Oduduwa groups; the former were in effective control before the latter, who were much better organised, displaced them.

The story of Moremi deals with the last resistance against the Oduduwa group whose entry has been roughly dated to the period between the 7th and 9th centuries. This threat to their survival came from a people known as the Igbo, who were earlier inhabitants of Ile-Ife. According to the traditions, they settled at Ideta Oko quarters in Ile-Ife beyond the Esinminrin River. They continuously raided this new Oduduwa settlement and made life unsafe. The traditions also recount how they came dressed during their raids like non-humans and successfully terrorised the Oduduwa group.

Moremi, a woman of the Oduduwa group, variously described as a princess, a queen or a mere commoner from Okerewe quarters in Ile-Ife, decided to rescue her people. She consulted the goddess of the Esinminrin stream and promised to give her what she prized most if she could help her people. Thereafter she allowed herself to be captured in the next Igbo raid, and while living among them discovered that their covering was nothing more than bamboo and the highly inflammable Ekan grass. Thereafter she escaped back to Ile-Ife and revealed this Igbo secret to her people. When the Igbo next carried their raids to Ile-Ife, lighted torches were set to their dresses and they were completely routed. Moremi went back to fulfil her vow to the goddess of Esinminrin and the goddess demanded of her, her most prized possession, her son, Oluorogbo. In great sorrow she sacrificed her son and thus helped to establish on a permanent basis the Oduduwa hold in that region.

Over the years, the Igbo were completely absorbed and many of their chiefs were integrated with the Oduduwa political system. After the successful consolidation in Ile-Ife, the leading Oduduwa princes left there to found their own dynasties and establish their sway over a large part of what is now known as Yoruba country.

The children of Oduduwa were full of gratitude to Moremi for her heroic deed and they decided to commemorate her bravery and keen sense of patriotism every year by the celebration of the Edi festival. This has now become an annual festival in which all the citizens participate. It takes place every dry season around October and lasts for seven days. It is a solemn but happy festival during which there is no drumming; only handclapping is allowed. The struggle between the Igbo and the Oduduwa groups is re-enacted, starting from the first day which is known as Oforan (the bringing of bad news i.e. about the coming of the Igbo) and ending on the seventh day when Tele, a human scapegoat, bears away all Ife ills from the town. One of the highlights of the festival, apart from the lighting of the torches, is the physical combat to mark the struggle between the two groups. Chief Obawinrin, head of the Igbo descendants fights a mock battle with Chief Eluyare who represents the Oduduwa group. There are

also daily wrestling matches in front of the palace of the Ooni, the ruler of Ile-Ife.

The Edi festival has however become much more than a commemorative festival. According to the traditions, the Ife people failed to keep their promise to Moremi and they suffered in consequence from plagues and sudden deaths. They sought her out and made a covenant (Edi) with her to hold this festival every year. It thus provides an opportunity every year for the symbolic ritual of cleansing the society and bearing away all the ills that might affect it; a clean bill of health is thus guaranteed for the succeeding year.

The recognition of Moremi's contribution has gone beyond the confines of her people in Ile-Ife. A temple in Ibadan and a women's hall of residence in the University of Ife have been named after her; the famous Yoruba playwright, the late Duro Ladipo, has immortalised her heroic deed in a play bearing her name.

Queen of Daura

The northern parts of Nigeria have sustained human inhabitants for a long time. For more than a millennium most of the inhabitants had been Hausa-speaking, but the population has not remained a homogenous one. The early period of settlement was characterised by migrations into the area from the Sahara and the Nile regions, which had affected the nature of the population, their systems of government and their cultures. In the development of this society in its early stages, the queen (Magajiya) of Daura, a small state in the far northern part of the region, was to play a decisive role.

Unlike Inkpi and Moremi, this queen, sometimes referred to as Daura, also the name of her state, was actually at the helm of affairs and was in a position to affect the course of development. As we shall notice in chapter two, in early Hausa society, women were the rulers as Magajiya. Daura in fact descended from a long list of queens; some traditions make her the ninth while others make her the seventeenth on the throne. It is difficult to date the period of her reign, but it has been suggested that she must have ruled before the tenth century A.D. What is clear is that Hausa society was still in a fluid state and was receptive to changes and ideas from outside that community.

The story of Daura, which is also often referred to as the Bayajida legend, is well known and has many versions. The role of Daura however does not change and all that is necessary therefore is to recapitulate its salient features.

According to the traditions, Abuyazid, a prince from Baghdad, came to settle in Bornu after having a disagreement with his father. The ruler of Bornu gave him his daughter, Magira, in marriage. It gradually dawned on the ruler however that Abuyazid was a powerful prince with a large following, who might constitute a threat to this continued stay on the

throne of Bornu. He therefore decided to kill him. Magira however got to know about the plot and divulged the plan to her husband. They escaped westwards, first to Gabas ta Buram where his wife had a son. He left her behind and continued westwards with his concubine to the small state of Daura. In Daura, he asked an old woman for water and was told that water could only be got on Fridays because a snake in the well prevented the inhabitants from drawing water except on that day. Abuyazid killed the snake and so made it possible for people to draw water from the well at any time.

In appreciation, the queen of Daura offered him half her kingdom as she had promised she would to anyone who killed the snake. Abuyazid however preferred her hand in marriage and he moved into her palace. He became her chief adviser and was popularly referred to as Massarki (the snake killer). They had a son who, on the death of his parents, became the *de facto* ruler of Daura. He also inherited the royal insignia of the sword, dagger and drums which are said to be kept in Daura till today. It is not unlikely that he took his father's nickname as title and this has been retained by all Hausa rulers. For Bawo had six sons who became the eponymous founders of Kano, Daura, Zaira, Gobir, Katsina, Rano; his half brother was the father of the eponymous founder of Biram, the seventh Hausa state.

The Union of Abuyazid and Daura had one lasting and significant effect on the Hausa-speaking people. Through the instrumentality of Daura and Abuyazid, a common link was forged among all Hausa-speaking people which was to persist until very recent times. Daura became the mother of all Hausa states and their spiritual home.

Other significant developments also took place as a result of this union. With the succession of Bawo and his sons, there was a change in succession; the ruler now was to be a man and succession through the male line has continued till today. The tradition of female leadership did not, however die; women still continued to wield a great deal of influence in the government of the Hausa-speaking states.

The arrival of Abuyazid and her reception by Daura have also been identified with changes in the life style of her population. They were introduced to the art of sword making (metal work). It has been suggested that Abuyazid rode a mule to Daura and that the snake's head was that of a donkey; these two pack animals are of great significance in agricultural technology. Moreover the killing of the fetish snake has been described as the demise of the former religion and the introduction of a new one.

Conclusion

These women lived in the very early periods of the history of their different societies, at times which make historical reconstruction rather difficult. The historicity of the traditions surrounding their lives and deeds is

therefore likely to strain belief in parts; nevertheless these stories serve to encapsulate major events in the early histories of their people. The significant factor is that in the developments that shaped the nature of their societies and their future histories, these women played star roles. Indeed many of the changes they effected were far-reaching. For instance on the political plane, they participated in the events that brought new dynasties and governments into power. On each occasion they displayed a tremendous sense of patriotism and sacrificed their most prized possessions; they played the part of the saviour of their societies in preventing disaster and hardship.

In their role as saviours, they attracted the supernatural, acting as the *deus ex machina* when all else seemed impossible. It is therefore not out of place for them to metamorphose into tutelary goddesses of their people, who were also identified with the rituals for the purification of their society. Even Daura, Queen of Daura, was not exempted from this fate, as she was the source of the mystical union of all Hausa States.

From the deification and ritualisation stem the festivals to commemorate their achievements as well as the shrines, the monuments, the place names, the songs and the praise poems. These various activities carry with them a cultural content and help to develop the cultural aspect of life in their societies; for instance, the masquerades of the Igala not only have a religious significance, but also serve to promote the material culture of their people. Thus the lives of these women helped to strengthen the foundations of their societies at a time when those societies were in a state of flux and poised for change, and through the activities commemorating their achievements, paved the way for their future development.

Queen Amina of Zaria

Sa'ad Abubakr



Women have been quite active, socially and politically, in the affairs of their communities in Nigeria. The northern part of the country is full of many examples. In Borno, women officials such as the Magira (Queen Mother), the Gumsu, and the Magaram, the official elder sister of the Mai (ruler) wielded tremendous power and influence right from the time of the establishment of the Sefuwa dynasty. It is a fact that the most famous Sefuwa ruler in Borno, Mai Idris Aloma, received his political science education from his mother, the Magira Aisa Kili. In fact she was the regent in Borno from 1562–1570. In Hausaland on the other hand, women appear to have been the early political masters. The rulers of Daura before the 9th century as indicated in tradition, are said to have been women, the *Magajiyas* (Queens). But following the advent of alien elements, probably Arabs or Berbers, this dynasty came to an end. The leader of the immigrants succeeded in killing the snake which had been in control of the only water well and so he married the *Magajiya* of the Daura government and his son, Bawo, gave birth to the children who later became the rulers of the seven Hausa States. Thus, it is clear from Daura tradition that a female dynasty had existed and that it was replaced after the coming of aliens whose concept of succession may have been patrilineal. As far as the other Hausa states are concerned, we have no information regarding their political situation before the tenth century A.D. Even though there is an indication of a dynasty before Bagauda in Kano, we do not know if pre-Bayajida dynasties existed elsewhere.

The dynastic revolution which took place in Daura in the tenth century was followed by the rise of dynasties claiming descent from Bayajida. Since then, men rather than women have discharged the functions of the highest political office in Hausaland. Nevertheless, women were not totally eliminated from the political stage. The office of *Magajiya* continued to exist in Daura and its successive occupants over the centuries remained very influential in Daura society. In the other Hausa states, distinct offices for women, such as *Uwar Soro* (the lady of the chamber) or *Mai Daki* (owner of the room) emerged within the political set-up. Even though this evidence is not very strong, it can be said that women in pre-colonial Hausaland were not secluded politically. In this wise, the Hausa state of Zazzau was unique. Not only were women free to hold certain political offices within the government, but succession to the highest offices, *sarki* (king), was open to both male and female members

of the ruling dynasty. At least two of the rulers of this state before the nineteenth century jihad were, according to traditions, women, Bakwa Turunku and her daughter, Amina. It has even been suggested in one account that Amina was also succeeded by her sister, Zaria. Zazzau Zaria was therefore the only Hausa state where queens ever reigned since the fall of the *Magajiyas* in Daura. The aim of this study is to examine the life and reign of Amina, one of the two known queens in the history of Habe Zazzau.

Pre-Amina Zazzau

The plain of Zazzau, about one hundred kilometers to the south of Kano, is bounded by the rivers Tuba and Galma in the west and east, respectively. Its northern and southern limits are marked by the water-shed dividing the north from the south flowing streams, and by Kaduna river which receives both the Tuba and the Galma before it enters the great Niger near Nuregi. For more than a millenium, the inhabitants of the plain had been Hausa-speaking people. Professor Abdullahi Smith who made a study of Zazzau under the Hausa has provided us with a great deal of information about the people of this state. According to him the plain inhabitants, lived in "family groups clustered into hamlets for the purpose of communal and shifting agriculture". Politically, the early communities on the plain were organised on the basis of *Kauyuka* (hamlets) each basically independent under a *mai gida* (family head). But, some of the hamlets gradually developed into *garuruwa* (towns) following very favourable conditions, such as soil fertility, trade and lucrative industrial activity. Similarly, the political setup was transformed. The *Masu gida* (family heads) gave way to *sarakuma* (chiefs) whose authority superceded that of the family heads as the control of the towns extended over neighbouring smaller settlements and the tracts of land surrounding them. Thus, through this process of expanding political authority, two *birni* (city) type settlements, Turunku and Kufena, developed and controlled the whole plain of Zazzau. These two cities developed around the major inselbergs on the Zazzau plain and were said to have been inhabited by *Iskoki* (spirits). Since the two *birane* (cities) possessed religious attractions and provided security to the countryside, they virtually overshadowed all the other towns politically.

The existence of two cities raises the question as to whether the plain of Zazzau was under one or two rulers based at Turunku and Kufena. According to one tradition, the plain of Zazzau had all along existed under a single ruler derived from Gunguma, the son of Bawo. But the capital was never static. It shifted from one part of the plain to the other. The first was Kwasri then to Rikoci both in the northeast. From Rikoci, the centre was transferred to Wuciciri, then to Turunku and finally to Kufena before Zaria was founded. However, the idea that the plain of Zazzau had existed under a single dynasty and that Kufena developed after the

abandonment of Turunku is now open to serious doubt. We know that the first seventeen Habe rulers of Zazzau out of a total of sixty, according to various kinglists, are merely mentioned by name. There is neither an indication of reign-lengths nor of reign-places. But the twenty second, on the other hand, is mentioned in the kinglists as 'Bakwa of Turunku'. No doubt, this too raises an important question. Were the previous rulers not of Turunku but of Kufena or of some other place? Using the various kinglists, Abdullahi Smith has argued that the previous twenty or so rulers were not of Turunku and that the succession of Bakwa overshadowed the pre-existing dynasty of Kufena. It is also clear from his argument that it is wrong to say that Kufena developed after the demise of Turunku. After all, there is an indication of a town in Zazzau near the Kogin Kubanni in the Kano Chronicle. This may or may not refer to Kufena. But more important is the fact that the old wall encircling Kufena appears in part to be as old as the walls of Turunku. This has indeed been confirmed by archaeological evidence derived from the field studies undertaken by Ade Obayemi. We may therefore tentatively conclude that the cities of Turunku and Kufena developed contemporaneously.

It is therefore clear from the foregoing that the reign of Bakwa in the sixteenth century witnessed a number of important changes in the state of Zazzau. She is probably the first woman to have become Sarauniya (Queen) there, though it is not always quite clear if she was a woman or man. There are also conflicting traditions about her accession to office. One version maintains that she was a stranger, *bakwa*, who had moved into Turunku from the south. But another maintains that she was the daughter of Sarkin Zassau Nohir who eventually succeed her uncle Kawanissa as king c.1536. Recent studies have however indicated that Bakwa was, after all, not a stranger but an official of the kings of Kufena holding the title of Sarauniya with Turunku as her fief, who eventually seized power in an interregnum at Kufena.

The reign of the first Queen in Zazzau ushered in a new era for the state. The collapse of the Songhay empire in the west created a new drive towards the reinforcement of authority by the hitherto dependent *sarakuna* (rulers) of Hausaland. As we shall see, Kanta Kotal of Kebbi set the pace by revolting against the authority of the Askia and defending his independence by force of arms. In Zazzau on the other hand, it appears that the rulers embarked upon a policy of territorial expansion through conquests. They also subsequently developed centres of commerce which provided them with the necessary wealth to reinforce their position and authority. Thus, the reign of Bakwa and those subsequent to it marked the final evolution of the socio-political (as well as economic) structure of the state of Zazzau. Eventually, the monarchy emerged as the centre of a complex network of feudal relationships by which the authority of the *sarki* was extended not only throughout the plain of Zazzau but eventually also far to the south beyond the Kaduna river as far as the upper Gurara valley. The period of Zazzau's greatest expansion was undoub-

tedly, the reign of Bakwa Turunku's daughter, Amina the great. Much of the information on the life and reign of this great woman is derived from an anonymous writing, *Amina Sarauniya Zazzau*.

The Birth and Childhood of Amina

According to tradition, Amina was born during the reign of the Sarkin Zazzau Nohir, probably c.1533. Said to be the daughter of Bakwa, we have no information as to who Amina's father was. We have already indicated that Bakwa was probably a fief holder of the Kufena kings based at Turunku. Thus, if we consider this against the tradition that Amina was a grand daughter of Sarki Nohir, it would appear that Bakwa was either his daughter or daughter-in-law.

Like all children in Hausaland at the time, Amina was weaned at the age of two by Marka, the favourite wife of her grandfather. But unlike other Hausa girls of her age, Amina spent her childhood in a different way. It is said that as soon as she began crawling, she started to frequent the court of her grandfather. The tradition indicates that whenever the court was in full session Amina would crawl from inside the palace straight to the dais of the king, passing the bodyguards, slaves and other courtiers. On seeing her, the king would stand up to carry her. He would then sit down placing the young lady on his laps and then proceed with the daily business. Thus, from the age of two Amina became a girl of the court. This habit of frequenting the court continued and the various rulers never checked her. While all girls were attached to their mothers or grandmothers, thereby acquiring the skills usually associated with that sex, Amina by attaching herself to her grandfather and by identifying herself with the court began to acquire different skills not normally expected of girls. There is no doubt that young Amina grew up in a special and different environment. The court was a political environment and by growing up there Amina came to understand the operation of government, the art of dealing with different groups, slaves, courtiers and warriors present in the court. Equally important, Amina also began to learn about military tactics, logistics and organisation from the leading warriors who frequented the sovereign's court. Thus, young Amina's close contacts with the government and its affairs, especially with the war machinery, considerably helped to shape her career in later years.

Amina Joins the Government of Zazzau

In c.1535 Sarkin Zazzau Nohir died and was succeeded by his brother, Kawanissa. But he too died after only one year in office and so Bakwa of Turunku was either elected or seized the office. The accession of Amina's mother to the office of ruler marked the beginning of her remarkable political career in the state of Zazzau. As the first born of the sovereign, she was entitled to a political office in the government and it is said that

Amina was appointed the *Magajiya* (heir apparent) by her mother. Hitherto, she lived in the palace, but following her appointment she moved out to *Unguwar Magajiya*; the ward where the heir to the throne resided. As an officer in the government, the *Magajiya* was expected to attend the daily sessions of the sarki's court along with the other leading officials, such as the *Galadima*, *Madawaki*, *Wambai*, *Barde* and *Kuyambana*.

Tradition indicates that Amina was a young girl when she was appointed the *Magajiya*. She was sixteen, an age which was most appropriate for marriage among the Hausa people. Quite naturally therefore she had many suitors, each one eager to have not only a beautiful young girl but also the sovereign's daughter as wife. Almost all the leading officers in the government of Zazzau offered themselves to the *Magajiya* for marriage. There were offers even from beyond the state of Zazzau. It is said that the King of Kano, Kama Masu, sent over one hundred slaves proposing marriage to Amina. But she was not keen on marriage and all the various suitors were turned down. Her most serious suitor, according to tradition, was the Makaman Zazzau who spent a lot of his wealth in order to win her over. But all was to no avail: Amina was decidedly against marriage. There is no doubt that she preferred to lead a life of independence as an officer of the government. Certainly marriage would have affected her position in the administration and her role in the affairs of the land.

The appointment of Amina as the *Magajiya* brought her into closer touch with politics and she gained tremendous practical experience over the years. However, warfare remained her main interest. Here too, more frequent interaction with the leading warriors in Zazzau broadened her general knowledge about tactics and logistics. But she had never been able to put her experience into practice in the battlefield. The ruler Bakwa was not militaristic essentially, she was a peace loving woman whose main interest was merriment. Tradition points out that during the reign of Bakwa it was a daily duty for women of the palace to sing for the queen after the court session and perform the *gada*, a dance accompanied by the *Kalangu* (talking drum) which is still very popular among Hausa girls. She even built a spacious room called *Kigo* in the palace for the daily dances. The spacious room is still known by this name in the Emir's palace in Zaria. What is clear from the above tradition is that queen Bakwa's reign was one of peace and stability. The queen left security and defence matters to her lieutenants. Tradition does not speak of wars by Bakwa and we have no other evidence of warfare during her reign which came to an end following her death c.1566.

Bakwa was succeeded by her younger brother Karama. The new ruler, unlike his predecessor, was very keen on wars and conquests. According to tradition, as soon as Karama became king, all the leading warriors, including the *Magajiya* Amina, began to repair their weapons which had been abandoned in neglect during the long reign of Queen Bakwa. To

emphasise that there had been no war during the time of Bakwa, tradition says that quivers were covered by spider's web while swords and arrows had gone rusty because of long disuse. Thus, following the accession of Karama, Amina's main interest, warfare, became a major pre-occupation of the Zazzau government. The palace slaves as well as the warriors, had at last got what they had looked forward to: wars. Hitherto, they had been idle; thenceforth, they would be active in the field serving their king and state. Karama was personally enthusiastic about war and tradition says that throughout the ten years of his reign his horse was ever ready for going out to campaigns. Amina was also not less enthusiastic. It is said that whenever the cavalry was requested to assemble for expeditions, she was always among the first to show up in the palace. Her interest in wars is beyond imagination; in courage and bravery she excelled all her age-mates. Within two years four major battles were fought by Zazzau and the Magajiya Amina put her military training into practice. She eventually emerged as the leading warrior in the state of Zazzau and also one of the wealthiest, having accumulated slaves and booty through her active participation in warfare. She had also inherited considerable assets from her late mother.

Amina Becomes the Sarauniya of Zazzau

When King Karama of Zazzau died c. 1576, there was no doubt as to who the successor was likely to be. Not that there were no strong contenders, but the Magajiya Amina had already emerged as the most suitable successor to the office. She had proved herself a capable leader both on the homefront and on the battlefield. Thus, when the *Sarakunan Karaga* (king makers) comprising the *Makama*, *Galadima*, *Fagaci* and *Sarki Yaki* assembled, the appointment of Amina was a foregone conclusion. The merriments and jubilation that accompanied her coronation testified to the general public approval of her accession to office.

Following her appointment, it is said that Amina outlined the policies of her administration during the traditional accession message to the leading civil and military officials of Zazzau. It was not a secret that the new ruler was military-oriented and she made this clear to all the citizens and her officials. She appealed to the people to wake up and face the task ahead. The queen implored the leading warriors to resharpen their weapons. Tradition indicates that after only three months in office the new queen set out on her premier campaign as the sovereign of Zazzau and thereafter, she fought without rest till her death.

It has already been indicated that the sixteenth century was a period of general commotion not only in Zazzau, but throughout the length and breadth of the central Sudan. Hausaland became the scene of skirmishes and battles between the rival empires, Borno in the east and Songhay in the west. Askia al-Hajji of Songhay led an expedition against Borno and then to Katsina and Agades during the second decade of the sixteenth

century. However, the military activities of Songhay in the east came to a sudden and dramatic end following the emergence of Kanta, said to be a ruler of Leka near Gandi in the region to the far west of the state of Zazzau. Songhay's efforts to subdue Kanta resulted in the defeat of the Askia Muhammed Benkam at Quntar Musa c.1537. This defeat marked the formal end of Songhay's hegemony over the Hausa states. Peace and amity reigned over Hausaland and this probably explains the state of warlessness in Zazzau during the reigns of Nohir and Bakwa. But the period of respite soon came to an end. The activities of Borno and Kano, both neighbours of Zazzau, had been very threatening to it and Amina may have been compelled to act in order to protect her territorial integrity. Alternatively, it may have been that she seized the opportunity afforded by the collapse of Songhay to embark upon a policy of territorial expansion at the expense of other contemporary powers.

Although there is no firm indication of the direction of Zazzau's military activities since the sixteenth century, it is clear that room for expansion northwards and eastwards was very limited. The activities of Kano and Katsina, both being very active during the same period, created difficulty in the way of Zazzau to the north. The latter, probably as a measure of security, is said to have established a fortress at Gozaki, near its frontier with Zazzau. Kano on the other hand is said to have attacked Zazzau during the reign of Abdulahi Muhammed Rumfa. Nevertheless, the time of queen Amina we have no indication of war between Zazzau and its two northern neighbours. Thus, the statement by Muhammed Bello in his book, *Infagal-Maysur*, that "both Kano and Katsina paid her (Amina) tribute" is curious since neither is reported to have been attacked and conquered by Zazzau. Its expansion eastwards was similarly blocked, not by powerful states but, by the central Nigerian highlands.

To the south and west, on the other hand, there was neither physical nor political barrier for the territorial expansion of the kingdom of Zazzau. Quite naturally therefore, the attention of Amina turned to those regions and it is said that she campaigned beyond the frontier of Zazzau as far as Nupeland in the southwest and Kwararafa in the southeast. In regard to the former, it is said that the ruler of Nupe sent forty eunuchs and ten thousand kolanuts to her and that Amina became the first ruler in Hausaland to have had eunuchs and kola. The exploits of Amina are still widely recounted throughout Hausaland. Muhammed Bello also pointed out in his book that she also raided into the slave countries (Bauci) until she reached what he described as "the encircling water on the south and west ..." As a result of this Zazzau became the largest of the Hausa states, with Queen Amina being the mistress of all the countries conquered.

Clearly, the activities of Amina extended beyond the frontier of Hausaland to the 'encircling water on the south and west', probably the middle Benue and Niger Regions, respectively. Consequently, the state of Zazzau expanded substantially and comprised many areas that were known as "slave regions such as the seven countries of Gwari ... Gwan-

dara, Doma, Yeskwa, Kwato, ... Adama, another Kwato ... Kwararafa and Atagagara". Even if one disputes the fact that distant territories were conquered and incorporated into Zazzau by Amina, there is no doubt that Hausa influence spread westwards and southwards through the activities of the ruler of Zazzau and through the migration and settlement of the *Zazzagawa* (people of Zazzau) as from the sixteenth century.

Professor Abdullahi Smith has shown how, as from the sixteenth century, the rulers of Zazzau, had succeeded in bringing a number of communities into tributary relationship. These include the Kamuku of Tegna, Kuseriki and Kwangoma whose rulers became subject to Zazzau down to the end of the 18th century. Further south of Kamukuland, the influence of Zazzau extended to Basaland, where by the eighteenth century the chieftaincies of Gumna and Mashegu fell into the hands of Hausa immigrants. Similarly, various Gwari groups fell within the orbit of the influence of Zazzau probably as early as the 16th century. For by the end of the eighteenth century, while the Gwari of Dogon Dawa, Cikun and Galadiman Kogo were incorporated in Zazzau, those further south at Kushaka, Kuta and Fuka among others, were in loose association with the state.

Another area where the influence of Zazzau had started to build up as early as the sixteenth century is the region to the south of the Kaduna river bend. Here too as elsewhere, the state of Kajuru with its dependencies spreading as far as the River Gurara emerged as tributary to Zazzau. To the east of the Kaduna river and south of *Kogin* (river) Karami, the small chieftaincy of Kauru with its mixed population and the small communities of Kurama, Chawai, Morwa, Katab and Kaje became subject to the ruler of Zazzau. Although we are not in a position to say when this tributary relationship definitely began, it seems quite reasonable to suggest that the influence of the *Zazzagawa* started about the sixteenth century. This came about partly through conquest but largely through migrations of the Hausas to the south. The various immigrants founded settlements which as Professor Smith pointed out eventually became the "vehicle for the spread of the influence of Zazzau". The most outstanding settlement was Zangon Katab which comprised a thriving community of Hausa traders and blacksmiths. Further south, while the Gwandara claim to be descendants of Hausa migrants from Kano, the Yeskwa, Kwato and Doma are said to have been conquered by Zazzau. Finally, there exist in the middle Benue region obscure traditions of ancient northern immigrants called Abakpa by the Idoma and Abakwariga by the Jukun, and it is not implausible that they too were *Zazzagawa* of the great expansion.

That Zazzau witnessed a period of great expansion through migrations and warfare cannot be disputed. But what is not clear from the evidence at our disposal is how far Queen Amina was responsible for this. It is quite apparent that she was an outstanding military leader not only in the history of Zazzau but of the Western Sudan and she was fully

committed to a policy of war and expansion. But she alone may not have been responsible for the entire 'great expansion'. Nevertheless there is no reason why we should not regard her reign as having marked the beginning of the processes which culminated in it. If the traditions about Amina are correct, it is said that she never spent three months at a stretch in her capital throughout her reign. Thus, her conquests during the thirty-four years she was in power must have been tremendous. Today, Amina is remembered not just as a conqueror who devastated vast regions but also "as a builder of towns". It is said that wherever she encamped during her various campaigns a wall had to be built around the camp even if she would not spend more than a week in that area. The various camps eventually developed into towns. It is therefore not surprising that many walled settlements in Zazzau trace their origin to the period of Amina. Similarly, the remnants of many walls around towns all over Hausaland are today known as "ganuwar Amina" (Amina's wall). There is indeed presently a Hausa saying, "wane ya cika takama da tsufa kamar ganuwar Amina" meaning "as proud and old as the walls of Amina".

With regard to the external relations of Zazzau during the reign of Amina only very few things can be said. This is because such information as now exists relates mainly to her conquests. Nevertheless, it is quite possible to speculate on the nature of relationships with the northern and northeastern neighbours, Katsina, Kano and Borno. According to Abdullahi Smith, the developing power of Zazzau not only effectively inhibited aggression, by the other Hausa states, it also spared it the recurrent warfare which, down to the end of the eighteenth century characterised the relations between Kano and Katsina, and later between Zamfara and Kano, Gobir and Kano, and Gobir and Katsina.

Information regarding relations with Borno is also very limited. What is known is that the second Kanuri empire embarked on territorial expansion to the west as from the sixteenth century. With the foundation of Nguru, Borno's activities extended to the borders of Kano and Zazzau. Even though Zazzau was not threatened directly, we have a tradition indicating that Queen Amina had confronted a Borno expedition at Gadaz. However, the encounter was of a friendly nature. The expedition came to request her hand in marriage to the Mai Borno, who was then probably the famous Idris Alooma. It may have been that by the sixteenth century Kanuri immigrants had started to enter the kingdom of Zazzau. Communication between the two had already developed through the valley of the river Iggi, and by the eighteenth century the influence of the Kanuri had become very considerable to Zazzau. By this time, an official known as *Bakon Borno* (stranger from Borno) had emerged among the *yan fada* (courtiers) of the sarki (ruler). It has been suggested that this official was an envoy of the Mai of Borno. There were also two more officials, *Kadalla* and *Magajin Mallam*; the former had been sent by the Mai of Borno to live in Zazzau and the latter had a role to play in the

appointment of a new sarki (ruler) in the state. This may have developed through Kanuri migration into and settlement within the Kasar Zazzau dating back to the sixteenth century. Several villages on the Zazzau plain go by the name *Unguwar Barebari* and it has also been suggested that the present district of Kona in Zaria was originally a settlement of the Kanuri before it was enclosed by the later city wall. Relations were also established, through its southern and western dependencies, with the Alafinate of the Oyo Yoruba and the other forest states.

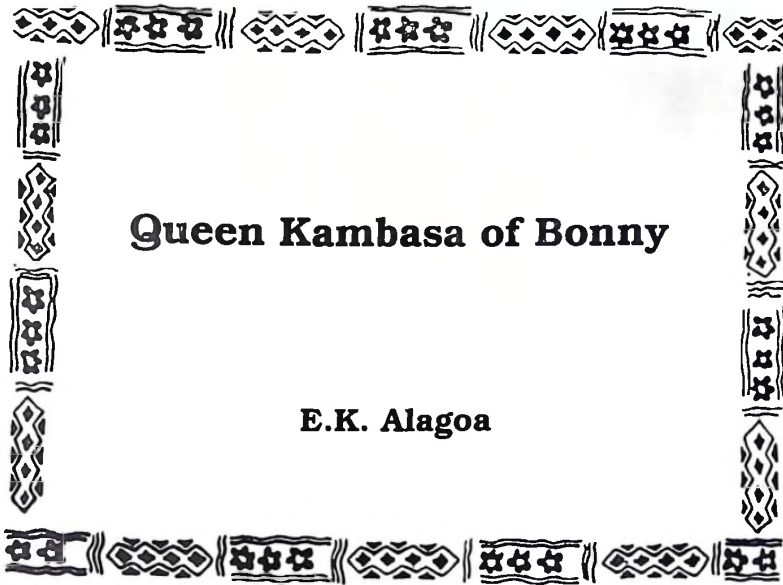
As a result of the growth of the network of international relations, probably as from the time of queen Amina, Zazzau developed varied commercial connections. Trade routes from the other Hausa states, from Borno through the valley of river Iggi, from the middle Niger by way of Yawuri, from Yorubaland and Nupe, and from the middle Benue region converged on Zazzau. Thus, while wars and territorial expansion accompanying the reign of Amina increased wealth for the government through *ganima* (booty) and tribute, the establishment of an extensive network of international relations boosted trade thereby increasing the general prosperity of the rulers and the ruled.

No doubt, Amina is among the outstanding leaders of sixteenth century Hausaland. Much of the surviving traditions about her reign relate to her military activities because they appear to be more spectacular and sensational. Thus, we lack knowledge about her administration. One would have liked to know how the vast territories added to Zazzau were administered and whether or not new offices were created in the government to shoulder the added responsibility of dealing with distant peoples. Abdullahi Smith has shown that a number of administrative districts in Zazzau eventually came under men of southern origins. These include such officials as the Galadima, Makama, Sarkin Fada. It has also been suggested that the offices were created at the time of the great expansion as counterweight to the independent power of the freeborn *masu sarauta* (ruling elite) and that they eventually dominated the government of Zazzau through the power they wielded in the south. We do not as yet know, however when the various offices began to feature in the central government. What we have is that Amina is a very astute administrator who never relied solely on information about events and developments in the kingdom reaching her through messengers and courtiers, as hearsay. Whenever she had an indication of trouble in any part of the country she would not rest content until she had been at the place to see things for herself. Similarly, it is said that she never fully agreed to what others told her about her officials and subordinates: "Amina believed in verifying things reported to her" so goes the tradition, "and that was why she succeeded in effectively governing her vast domain".

Also we do not seem to know very much about the private life of this female sovereign. This lack of information about her personal life and her spectacular life style have led to many speculations about her marital status. According to one tradition, Amina never married even though

many people, including commoners and rulers approached her. In reply to the marriage proposal by the Mai of Borno, Amina is reported to have said that "she would never be subject to the control of a man". But another tradition points out that Amina married many times, but in the manner of the Ashanti Queen mothers she took a new husband every night, and had him put to death in the morning! After a reign of over thirty years, Amina died at Atagara leaving no issue behind but a vast kingdom for the people of Zazzau.

Even though not enough is known about the person and period of queen Amina, there is no doubt that the very little information available points to a conclusion that she was a very remarkable ruler, not only in the state of Zazzau but in the whole of sub-Saharan Africa in the sixteenth century. A contemporary, first of Muhammed Shashere and later Muhammed Zaki of Kano, Amina by building up a strong military force in Zazzau, succeeded in making her state one of the most famous in the western Sudan. While both Kano and Katsina were bogged down by rivalry and conflicts, as well as external threats from the Kwararafa, Zazzau under Amina extended its frontiers considerably and prospered tremendously through increased trade which was made possible by territorial expansion. Her achievements for Zazzau were not fewer than those for Borno under another contemporary of hers, the Mai Idris Aloma.



Queen Kambasa of Bonny

E.K. Alagoa



Kambasa was the first woman to rule over the people of Bonny. And since her time, no other woman has been made ruler. In all the neighbouring kingdoms of the Niger Delta, no woman ever became *amanyanabo* or ruler. It was, therefore, something unusual for Kambasa to become ruler over the Bonny kingdom. She created a record in the history of the Delta states by becoming the first and only woman ruler.

Although the Delta states did not choose women to be their ruler, they respected womanhood. In their social system, women were regarded as the most important members. Children belonged to the family of the mother, and to that of the father, in many of the states. The only exception was if the father married the mother in some special system of marriage. Accordingly, a man normally obtained his birthright through the status of the mother. In the religious sphere, the supreme being or God, was regarded as a woman, a mother. There can be no stronger evidence than this of the respected place women occupied in the thinking of the people of the Niger Delta. In addition, some kingdoms, like the Kalabari to the immediate north-east of the Bonny, had female national gods.

The reason why women were not made rulers may have been because of the fact that these kingdoms were often engaged in wars against each other, and against other neighbouring people. It was because of these wars that most of these states had male war-gods as their protective deities. Thus the Bani, as the people of Bonny are called, worshipped Ikuba as their national god. Similarly, the Kalabari who had a female national god, Awomekaso, still had a male war-god, Okpolodo, as a subsidiary national god. The people also found it more practicable to have kings rather than queens to lead them to war and to defend them against attack.

Nobody wrote down the story of Queen Kambasa at the time she lived and ruled in Bonny. What we know of her life is the little that has been remembered by old people and told by word of mouth from father to son over hundreds of years. Bonny oral traditions remember the time of Queen Kambasa as a time of war and unsettled conditions. That is one reason why it is wonderful that a woman could have ruled as successfully as Kambasa did. Stories of the past remembered in oral traditions sometimes sound strange and unbelievable. The story of a woman becoming a ruler so long ago becomes even stranger, and some Bonny historians seem to have disbelieved even her existence.

Thus, we find that some lists of the rulers of Bonny have the name, Edimini, in place of Kambasa. Some recent writers have however stated that Edimini was, in fact, the father of Queen Kambasa. These writers refer to the queen as Edimini-ba Kambasa, meaning, Edimini's daughter, Kambasa. However, since Kambasa's grandfather, King Asimini was such an important ruler, and Kambasa too was such an unusual ruler, her father, Edimini is often no more than a name in the oral traditions. Very much less is known about him than about the other rulers. This may be the reason why his name is sometimes combined with that of Queen Kambasa in some of the king-lists as Edimini Kambasa. This name on such lists actually refers to Queen Kambasa, and then it is stated that she was the daughter of Asimini, her grandfather. Queen Kambasa's greater fame as a ruler therefore sometimes has the effect of covering the period of her father, King Edimini, so that her reign is extended over his, and she becomes the daughter of her equally famous grandfather, King Asimini.

It is told that Portuguese traders first arrived in the Bonny Kingdom during the reign of King Alagbariye, who was succeeded by King Asimini. In fact, according to the oral traditions, King Alagbariye gave up his position to Asimini because of the trade with the Portuguese. The entrance to the Bonny River was too shallow and the Portuguese ships could not come into the port. The priests stated that the river would become deeper and wider if the king sacrificed his daughter to the gods. Alagbariye refused to do it since he had previously sacrificed another daughter to get fresh drinking water for the people of Bonny. It was thus that Kambasa's grandfather, Asimini became king by sacrificing his daughter, Ogbolo to the gods of the sea. After this the Bonny River gradually became deeper and wider, and soon the Portuguese ships were coming to trade.

Queen Kambasa's grandfather then, is remembered in Bonny oral traditions as the man who brought trade with the Europeans to Bonny. This means that he brought wealth, prosperity, and international contacts to the kingdom. It is for this reason that King Asimini is also regarded as the first ruler of Bonny to exercise the full powers of a king, which he passed to his son, Edimini and grand-daughter, Kambasa. We will see how Queen Kambasa made the position handed to her much stronger, and passed the kingship down to her own son. Before the time of King Asimini, the position of supreme head of Bonny was given to the oldest man, to a priest, or the most prominent person. King Asimini and Queen Kambasa created a definite royal line through which the crown would be passed down.

The connection of King Asimini with Portuguese trade at Bonny gives us a way of estimating roughly the time in which Queen Kambasa lived and reigned. The Portuguese are known to have established official relationship with the Oba of Benin in 1486. But it is believed that the Portuguese had been trading in the coastal ports of Nigeria, such as

Bonny, long before that. The date 1450 is usually given in Bonny as the date on which the Portuguese came into the port of Bonny to make a formal agreement for trade with King Asimini. We may conclude from these dates that Queen Kambasa lived and reigned in Bonny around 1500. That is, she may have been born before that date, and died about that date or a little later. We can see from how long ago Queen Kambasa lived why so little is remembered about details of her life, and why there are differences between the historians of Bonny about the names of their rulers and the order in which they reigned.

Early Life

Kambasa was born at a time when the Bonny Kingdom was entering a period of prosperity. During the period of her grandfather, King Asimini, trade had been established with the Portuguese. The king controlled most of the trade, and the chiefs traded only through his influence. The Europeans also paid customs duties to the king for his protection, and for the trade on the Bonny River. Kambasa's father, King Edminini inherited this system, and benefited from the prosperity brought by the trade. Accordingly, the young girl, Kambasa lacked nothing that money could buy. She had plenty of bracelets made out of bronze objects brought by the Portuguese. Some of these bracelets, later called *manillas*, were also used as money, in trade. But others were reworked by local craftsmen into beautiful ornaments for princesses such as Kambasa.

Retainers of Kambasa's father went in canoes through the Andoni creeks to the Ogoni and Ndoki mainland. They traded with the Ndoki up the Imo River as far as Azuogu and Akwete, inland into the Ogoni country as far as Opuoko. They brought back to Bonny, slaves to be sold to the Portuguese, as well as cows, goats, sheep, yams, and other foodstuffs. The Bonny traders gave salt to the Ogoni, Ndoki, and other Ibo people in exchange for their produce. The Portuguese paid copper bracelets to the people of Bonny for the slaves and food to feed the slaves and the crew of the ship.

Kambasa grew up as a strong girl. She had plenty of food to eat from her father's great canoes coming from the hinterland markets. And she ate plenty of fish caught by Bonny fishermen from the estuary of Bonny River and in neighbouring creeks. She became a girl of lively spirits. She liked singing and dancing with other girls, and playing hide and seek with other children. She was not afraid of boys, and would sometimes subdue boys that bullied her girl friends. Nothing a boy could do was beyond her. Kambasa could climb trees with the boys, swim across rivers with them, and play diving and other tough competitive games with the boys.

In addition to her robust outdoor life, Kambasa stayed by the side of her mother to learn all the things that a growing girl needed to know. She learned to cook and to keep a home. She also took great interest in discussions between her father and his chiefs and elders. Although a girl

was not normally expected to know too much about such things, her father always explained things to her. He told her the history of the Bonny or Ibani people.

King Edimini told his daughter about their great ancestor, Ibani, who had lived among the Ijo of the Central Delta. He told her also of the migration of other ancestors out of the Central Delta through Ibo country to Ndoki and later to Opuoko in the land of the Ogoni. He told how the Ogoni had become hostile and driven Alagbariye, Opuamakuo, and Ndoli Okpara to take refuge at Orupiri. And finally, how the ancestors moved from Orupiri to their permanent settlement of Okoloama or Bonny. King Edimini told the history of each of the ancestors and rulers of Bonny up to his own time. King Edimini also explained to his daughter, his own plans to increase the trade and power of Bonny beyond what his father had handed to him.

Soon Kambasa grew into a beautiful young woman. News of her good looks and good sense spread into all the inland places at which Bonny-men traded. Many chiefs in Bonny as well as from the surrounding communities came to ask King Edimini for her hand in marriage. One of the suitors was Opoli of Azuogu in the Ndoki country. King Edimini decided to marry his daughter off to Opoli because he wanted to have a friend in the Ndoki country, which was one of his best trading markets. He was not necessarily interested in a large bride-wealth payment. Opoli was however anxious to show his father-in-law and future wife how generous he was. He therefore sent three canoes full of manillas. King Edimini left the canoe-loads of manillas to sink into the river, to show that he was himself a rich ruler and did not require anything from Opoli.

Kambasa herself was rather too young to make up her own mind about whom to marry when her father decided it was to be Opoli of Azuogu. She did not want to offend her father. She was also curious about marriage, and excited at the idea of going to a distant land to be an important grown up woman.

In this way Kambasa was married to Opoli and went to live in the Ndoki country. This gave her the opportunity to know at first hand a people with whom her ancestors had early contacts during the period of migration. And more important, a people who supplied many of the goods with which her people traded with the European visitors at the port of Bonny. This personal knowledge of the Bonny trade area was to prove very useful to Kambasa when she herself became queen. But her connection with the Ndoki had gone beyond mere friendly relations because of her marriage to Opoli, especially after they had their first son, Kumalu.

As Kambasa grew into a mature woman, she began to do what she wanted to do rather than what her parents or other people expected her to do. She decided that she would return to live in Bonny. One reason was that she became home-sick for her place of birth, and wished to be near her father in his last days. But she had also made friends with a Bonny chief, Biriye, and had made up her mind to be near him. She was

also to persuade her husband, Opoli, to come with her to Bonny.

Kambasa Becomes Queen

Kambasa was a remarkably liberated woman, to use the expression of the modern champions of women's equality with men. She did not allow anybody to tell her what she could do or could not do. She did not believe that certain things were reserved for men and barred to women. She showed this aspect of her character in two ways.

First, in her relations with her husband, Opoli, and with her lover, Biriye. It seems that her relations with the lover were known to her husband. It was not a secret affair. We have evidence of this fact from the name given to Kambasa's second son. The first son had been named Kumalu by Opoli, and recognised by all to be his natural son. But the second son born after the couple returned to Bonny was named by Opoli, Papabara or Papanye, meaning 'love's labour lost'. Opoli gave the child this name because, although he was Kambasa's husband, the child's father was Biriye. That is, Opoli was the social father and Biriye the biological father.

Thus Kambasa was independent enough to have both Opoli and Biriye accept the situation of sharing her love. But more remarkably, she made the Bonny community accept this open breaking of the rules of conduct laid down for women. That is, that a married woman should never be known to have a lover, although a man could marry as many women as he wished and keep as many lovers as he could afford. The success of her bid for the throne suggests that the people of her time did not think that her conduct disqualified her for the position of ruler over Bonny. Not only did it not disqualify her for the throne, it also did not disqualify the children born out of her illicit love affair with Biriye. Thus, although Kambasa's first son with Opoli, Kumulu, succeeded her on the throne, Perekule, son of Biriye, son of Papanye, became king four reigns after Kumalu. And the most remarkable thing is that the kingship of Bonny has since passed in the direct line of Perekule (or Pepple I).

The second remarkable thing Kambasa did was the way in which she became supreme ruler over the Bonny kingdom. Up to the time of her grandfather, Asimini, the succession to the throne followed in no definite hereditary line. Sometimes the oldest man was chosen ruler. At other times, a priest, such as Alagbarye, was chosen ruler. In yet other cases, persons became ruler because they were willing to make exceptional sacrifices in the general interest. Both Alagbarye and Asimini sacrificed their daughters, in the first case, to obtain drinking water, and in the second case, to deepen the Bonny River for European trade ships. Kambasa's father, Edimini, was the first ruler to take over the succession from his father. Accordingly, it was by no means certain that a child of Edimini would succeed him, even if that child were a boy. And since his only child was a girl, Kambasa had very slim chances of becoming ruler

by the customary processes of selection. But Kambasa was not a normal person to permit custom free play. She decided to force the issue.

Kambasa decided to stay close to her ailing father in his last days. She had always been close to him out of love. But her decision to come to Bonny with her Ndoki husband may have been influenced in part by calculations concerning the throne. Accordingly, as soon as King Edimini drew his last breath, Kambasa seized the Ivory tusk, which was then the most important symbol of kingship.

It was by such artifice that Kambasa forced the hands of the elders and priests, and virtually crowned herself in the style Napoleon of France was to make famous.

Kambasa as Political Leader

The decisive manner in which Kambasa came to the throne was an effective way of serving notice to the chiefs and people that she would not tolerate any opposition. There could no longer be any doubt that this was going to be a ruler who knew what she wanted, and would go out to get it. It was clear to the political and religious leaders that the new queen would demand complete loyalty and obedience to her will. And that she would demand strict discipline and respect.

Kambasa realised that the final seal of political power was the ability to carry out decisions, and that this ability rested on the possession of force. She therefore gave attention to building up a force to carry out her decision at home, and to serve as bodyguards. This palace guard was called *Okpuapu*. Previously, the function of royal guards was carried out informally by mainly lineage members of the ruler, and by other supporters. Kambasa created a formal institution of royal guards to make herself stronger. The Queen also took steps to give dignity to her chiefs' customary processes of selection.

Kambasa as Patron of Arts

Kambasa was a strong ruler, but she was not an austere person. She was lively, but not frivolous. Stern as a ruler, she also had time for entertainment. She continued membership of all the women's dance groups with which she had been associated as a girl. Even if she could no longer take part in their activities, she encouraged them to perform in the palace and to maintain a strong connection with the throne.

Queen Kambasa also became a patron of the artistic activities of men's cultural groups. For example, men's mask dancing had not been centrally organised before the reign of Queen Kambasa. A few groups played individual masks representing single water-spirits of marine creatures. She encouraged the formation of an all-embracing mask society called *Owu Ogbo*. This brought together all the men of talent in dancing, singing and drumming. And since it had to commission masks for display, this

also served as a means of encouraging the art of making wooden sculptures.

It is clear that Queen Kambasa's activities as a patron of the arts were a part of her effectiveness as a ruler. She was queen of all the people; men and women, young and old. All classes and conditions of people were interested in these activities.

The formation of the *Owu Ogbo*, for example, may be seen as an act of good statesmanship. The groups into which people organised for political action tended to divide the people. The various leaders tended to compete for political positions, with their families and supporters behind them. The creation of titles and ranks, although good for discipline, also served to divide people. Societies such as *Owu Ogbo* served as a meeting ground for people of different classes and different lineage connections. The criteria for advancement in such cultural clubs were the open criteria of talent in dancing, singing, or drumming. These criteria were different from those of wealth or of birth used to determine status in politics and social relations.

Queen Kambasa then, was a ruler of the artistically talented, as well as of the politically influential. She was capable of giving encouragement to all classes to work together in various fields.

Kambasa as Warrior Queen

In the traditions of the Bonny Kingdom, Kambasa is remembered also as a warrior queen. She was the first ruler to organise and lead the kingdom in a war outside it, in an effort to assert its power over its neighbours, and to extend its influence. Queen Kambasa then, was the ruler to begin the martial tradition of the Bonny Kingdom.

Bonny traditions relate the story of Queen Kambasa's war as follows: during the period of migration through the interior, the founders stopped for a time at the Ogoni town of Opuoko. For some reason, the people of Opuoko became hostile, and killed some members of the group. Among those killed was the mother of Edimini, father of Queen Kambasa. Edimini, who had been born at Osoble near Azumini during the migration, was as yet a child when his mother was killed by the people of Opuoko. He swore to take his revenge in due course, but he grew up deformed and could do nothing about his vow of vengeance during his short reign. It was, accordingly, left for Queen Kambasa to avenge her grandmother and carry out her father's vow.

According to the Bonny traditions, the Queen trained a formidable army which she led personally against Opuoko. She sacked the town, and brought back a canoe-load of war trophies comprising the heads of the enemy slain in battle. Kambasa then created another new institution in Bonny, the House of Skulls. She instructed the high priest of the state god, Ikuba, to put up the skulls round the walls of the national shrine, as a memorial of her victory. European visitors to Bonny came to call this

shrine, the 'House of Skulls' because of the accumulation of skulls from the wars that the kingdom came to fight from time to time. It became the tradition to bring the skulls of the enemy dead whenever the kingdom went to war, and to place them in the Ikuba Shrine.

The Bonny traditions stress that Kambasa was not only a war leader, but also a constructive statesman. Thus, she took steps to make the reign of Opuoko a permanent and safe trade area for Bonny. She chose a site a little way outside Opuoko, close to the present Opobo River, for a Bonny market. This place became Kalaoko (lesser Oko, as opposed to Opuoko, Great Oko). Queen Kambasa is said to have placed an occupation force at Kalaoko to keep the peace in this part of the Bonny trade hinterland.

On Monday, August 3, 1973, I went to Opuoko to find out what the people there remembered about Queen Kambasa or about her attack. I was introduced to Chief Yomi Deidam, the oldest man in Opuoko. He told me that his father, Deidam, had taken part in clearing the site of Opobo for Jaja (Zozo to the old man) in 1869. He claimed that it was his grandfather, Windere, who sent Deidam, his father, to take Jaja to the site of Opobo.

Chief Yomi Deidam stated that the town known to the outside world as Opuoko has always been known to its inhabitants as Ko. Ko had been founded by three men, namely, Gbenemene Ko, Karaisiayo and Gbeneseagba. As for Kalaoko, its local name has no point of contact with its outside name. The local people called it Boon. Chief Deidam did not know of any connection between the foundation of the town and Queen Kambasa's war. His father had told him simply that Boon had been founded by Winlaba. As with the founders of Ko, Chief Deidam did not know from where Winlaba may have come.

It is clear that the one historical experience that remains green in the memory of the people of Opuoko or Ko, and of Kalaoko or Boon, is the conflict at Bonny leading to Jaja's succession and foundation of Opobo in 1869/70. Since then Opobo took over control of the affairs of the area, and relations with that city-state have apparently blocked out memory of the earlier contacts with Bonny. The story of Queen Kambasa is, accordingly, not remembered at Opuoko (Ko). When questioned on it Chief Yomi Deidam of Opuoko replied, "My father did not tell me". There is a blank in the period between the founders and the time of the Jaja wars.

However, the Opuoko traditions, even in their incomplete form, suggest that the town of Kalaoko (Boon) is unlikely to have been founded by men from Bonny. Boon was apparently founded by persons related to the founders of neighbouring Ko, with whom they collaborated in the performance of many traditional festivals. Rather than found a new town, Queen Kambasa may have enforced her authority at the market-town of Kalaoko, with or without a garrison to occupy the place.

Kambasa in Bonny History

Queen Kambasa is one of the heroic figures of Bonny history. She has attained this position for many reasons. In the freedom of her private life, she showed that a woman need not be more restricted than a man. She was a child of nature in the best sense of the expression, that is, that she acted naturally without being restricted too much by conventions created by society. Further, by the mere act of becoming Queen, she created a record of achievement for women in the Bonny kingdom and beyond. She has remained the first and only woman ruler in Bonny history.

What makes Queen Kambasa's reign even more remarkable is the fact of landmarks she erected in the history of the Bonny kingdom. She came to the throne at a time when the kingdom was still in its formative stages. She must be counted one of the builders of the institutions of the new developing state. By succeeding her father, and handing over the throne to her son, Kumalu, she strengthened the tradition of succession in a royal line. This principle became an accepted convention in the lineage of her great grandson, Perekule or Pepple I. After the succession became fixed in her descendants, Queen Kambasa's name also became an established feature of Bonny political history.

In a sense, Queen Kambasa may even be said to have given Bonny some of its most characteristic institutions. According to some of the traditions, she is credited with starting the history of Bonny wars of expansion and influence over her neighbours. She built up the first fighting force to set up a formal sphere of direct influence around Opuoko (Ko) in the Ogoni country. In the process of this unique exploit, she established the military aspects of the Ikuba national cult. She is said to have started the practice of placing the skulls of enemy casualties within the shrine of Ikuba, as a memorial of victory, and an inspiration to coming generations of Bonny warriors. These war trophies were also an offering to the war-god, Ikuba, who was the spiritual leader of the battle line.

It was remarkable enough that Queen Kambasa should have achieved so much as a political and military leader, but part of the reason for her success was her popularity as a social and cultural leader. By her support of cultural institutions and clubs, she won the love of all classes of the people. By winning mass following, she was able to enforce discipline among the political and religious leaders.

In sum then, Queen Kambasa was an effective ruler. By her strong will combined with tact, she achieved much more than most men. Kambasa deserves her heroic image in Bonny oral traditions and history. She was, indeed, a famous woman in her own time, and may be justly counted among the famous women of Nigerian history.

Nana Asma'u

A. Koko and Jean Boyd

“Nana Asma’u, the daughter of Shehu Uthman Dan Fodio, lived most of her life in the confines of her husband’s house. She was a dutiful wife and the mother of six sons, yet, after Muhammed Bello the famous warrior and Caliph, she is the most well known of the Shehu’s children. The role she played as an educator of women, her energy, her prolific writing and her piety have made her a legend.”

A girl of ten stood watching as books and manuscripts were taken from her father's room and skilfully loaded onto the backs of the waiting camels brought for the purpose by desert Tuaregs. All around her people were busy packing, grain was taken from the large sun-baked clay bins and poured into leather sacks, pounding bowls and pestles were tied onto waiting donkeys together with the straw sleeping mats. There was an air of urgency about the place: people called to each other in Hausa and Fulfulde and in the Tamalek of the Tuaregs. The little girl understood all three languages and was old enough to appreciate the seriousness of the situation. All the men wore swords and their home-spun clothes were tightly girded to ensure freedom of action. Newly sharpened spears, quivers full of glittering arrows and recently strung bows were near at hand to be carried away as each man set out for the north, taking with him his family and his possessions. They went on foot, only those too weak or too young to walk were lucky enough to ride on camels and donkeys. When it was time, the leader, who was the girl's father, came out and surrounded by well-armed men, rode away on a mare. The next day, Asma'u set out with the family group, leaving behind the thatched roofed huts in which she had spent her childhood. never to return.

The entire community travelled slowly northwards resting frequently, always on guard; and eventually reached a well-watered spot in the dry semi-desert of what is now the northern part of Sokoto State. Temporary shelter to protect people from the cold north-east winds had already been erected by an advance party and a few days after arrival the men gathered together near a *faru* tree to acclaim their leader, Asma'u's father. Previously they had been subjects of the powerful Hausa state of Gobir but now they were in exile, so their spiritual leader, Shehu Uthman dan Fodio, became also their temporal leader, with the title Amir al-Munini, in

English Caliph or Sultan.

This then was the Hijra of the Shehu which had such far reaching political and religious repercussions throughout the western Sudan. For Asma'u it meant the end of a childhood spent in security. She lived another sixty years, most of which were full of danger, but it is evident that what she learned in those early years remained the guiding principles of her life.

Shehu Uthman dan Fodio was the most eminent scholar of his generation in the western Sudan. Scion of a long line of scholars going back to the fifteenth century he had a brilliant mind and was renowned for his piety and learning by the time he was twenty-five. Scholars came to his family home at Degel from places near and far from present day Hausaland, Borno, Wadai, Mauretania and Azbin, to mention just a few. His genius however lay in his ability to explain, to ordinary men and women, religion and the workings of the law, in their own languages. It is not easy to explain complicated concepts to working peasantry, but this is exactly what the Shehu did using a patient, kindly manner which drew to him many devoted disciples.

When he began his work he went on journeys to the villages, then after a number of years, when he saw how his community had grown, he went to the kings and sought to explain his mission to them.

In his fortieth year the Shehu had the most significant of his mystic visions which convinced him of the righteousness of his endeavours and in the same year, 1794, Asma'u was born, a twin child to Maimunatu, his senior wife.

Asma'u had a number of brothers and sisters beside her twin brother Hassan; she also had step-mothers, step-brothers and step-sisters many of whom in the course of time were destined to become famous. As soon as she could speak fluently, she started to learn the Qur'an by heart; when she was five she started to learn to read and write. One of her teachers was her step-mother Gabdo, another was Gabdo's eldest daughter Kadijatu who in later life influenced Asma'u's poetic style. Gabdo's eldest son Muhammad Sa'adu taught Arabic grammar to Muhammed Bello, the famous Caliph, who was at this time a young man of 17.

It is evident that this large, polygamous family was a closely knit unit, all the elementary schooling being conducted by the mothers and older siblings. The aim was to produce young men and women of character, soundly versed in the Islamic sciences which include Grammar and Literature, Poetry, Logic and Mathematics as well as the different branches of Theology; the medium of instruction was Arabic. This system of education was of course not peculiar to the Shehu's family and has been widely practised in the Sudan for many generations.

The belief that this world is but a testing ground for the next is not peculiar to Islam nor is the belief that individuals must search for self-education. These beliefs are embodied in Sufism which is a means

to purification of the soul and it was practised in the Shehu's community. Put briefly, Sufism means divorcing oneself from materialism, worldliness and self-esteem, substituting in their place sublimation of the self and submission to the will of Allah.

The active Sufist, or indeed the good Muslim, is therefore exhorted to devote himself to the practice of piety, humility, compassion and Islamic learning and to attach little weight to the accumulation of power and property. It was these values which Asma'u learned at home and which guided her throughout her life. Training began young, before puberty; all time had to be put to proper use and activities during waking hours were organised accordingly. Everyone learned a craft for it was considered demeaning to eat what one had not earned by one's own efforts. Building, thatching, shoe repairing, mat making, hair plaiting, were the skills taught. The Shehu himself was a rope-maker and made enough rope each day to keep himself busy.

In addition to providing for the needs of this world everyone was expected to work towards redemption in the next through strict observance of religious obligations and through determined efforts to read as deeply and widely as his or her capabilities would allow. The day therefore was regulated; this was programmed living. There was a time to pray, a time to keep silence, a time for reading, a time for the rosary, a time to perform household obligations, a time to practise one's craft. Time not utilised in the prescribed manner was considered wasted.

Women were expected to follow the same educational programme as the men; no discrimination was shown either in the quality or the content of their studies. The Shehu made his view clear in his book where he says:

One of the things which have caused so much trouble in all the Hausa territories is the way many teachers are neglecting their wives, girl children and female slaves leaving them like beasts without teaching them what Allah demands. They should fix in their hearts — the regulations for ablution, prayers, fasting and so forth. This is a very serious mistake and a forbidden innovation in Islamic practice. They treat their wives and their girl children like tools to work with for if they spill, they are thrown on the rubbish heap. I am astounded! How can these teachers leave their wives and girl children and female slaves in the darkness of ignorance and error? Look how in contrast they teach their pupils morning and evening.

Girls and women in the community did not normally leave the environs of their fathers' or husbands' houses and social contact between men and women was strictly regulated, but within this framework women enjoyed close relationships with their brothers and uncles, visited their sisters and aunts and kept abreast of current affairs.

The Hijra from Degel to Gudu which took place in February 1804 was occasioned by the outbreak of hostility between the Shehu and the Chief

of Gobir who resented the Shehu's growing influence. The Shehu decided to move from Gobir, a pre-nineteenth century Hausa state, with his entire community and live apart. His action was decisive and set in train an irreversible series of events.

The Hijra was not only significant to the community in terms of its self-preservation, but also to Asma'u as it marked the end of her childhood.

The Community on the Defensive

Asma'u celebrated the Sallah at the end of Ramadan in a bivouac within a few miles of the enemy's fortress, Alkalawa. The date was January 3rd, 1805. Months previously, the Shehu with the community had left his refuge in the wilderness to which he had made his Hijra. They had gone there with meagre grain stores and the Gobir army had effectively prevented any further supplies reaching them. Hunger dictated a move to allies in Kebbi. From here after some months of parleying, the result of which was deadlock, the Shehu decided to take Alkalawa the Gobir capital, a city surrounded by high walls and deep defensive ditches made glassy smooth with specially prepared clay.

The community had no city, no permanent base and in consequence, nowhere to leave the families; so when the army set out to invade Alkalawa, it took everybody along, including the old and infirm, the women and children. They set out in October 1804. The strength of the army lay in the skill of its bowmen, most of whom were foot soldiers. The women and children walked or rode on donkeys and camels, always under the guardianship of the Shehu who inspired and counselled the army but did not enter the combat.

The whole group was ringed by well horsed men chosen for valour: nevertheless it was very vulnerable, moving only six or seven miles a day. The safety of Shehu and the families was a matter of great concern to the captains commanding the army among who was Asma'u step-brother Muhammad Bello, now a young man of twenty-two, noted for his mastery of strategy and his calculated courage.

It was decided to leave the group at a half-way staging point under heavy guard thus freeing the army to take up positions outside Alkalawa. The bulk of the army moved off and began their attack; however, Alkalawa proved to be much stronger than they had anticipated: the fighting was bitter.

Meanwhile the Shehu's camp was attacked by well directed Tuareg forces; the families were at risk so a contingent of the army left Alkalawa to come to their rescue. The Shehu decided that for safety's sake the only course of action open to him was to join up with the main body of the army.

This was how Asma'u found herself within a few miles of Alkalawa during the month of Ramadan. The sound of battle was constantly in her

ears, the fear of death or capture ever present. She saw her brothers and their friends ride out day after day, sometimes to attack, sometimes to seize food by force, but most of the time just to defend their lives and keep them safe. Everyone was hungry, many were sick either through wounds inflicted on them or from malnutrition. Every facility was lacking and the threat of destruction was constant.

After the Sallah spent in these bleak surroundings, news was reported of the death in action of one of the Shehu's brothers. In view of the waning strength of the community it was decided to make one last effort to take Alkalawa. To this end they moved to a position of even greater danger only two miles from those mighty walls of Alkalawa.

Soon afterwards Tuaregs moved up close to the Shehu's camp, on the eastern side, Alkalawa being on the west. Thus encircled, the families faced greater perils than before; a massive attack was launched against the camp. The Shehu's brother, Abdullahi, who was on sentry duty, was taken by surprise and found himself cut off. Muhammad Bello went to his rescue and together they prepared to face death within sight of the besieged families. The dangerous moment passed; uncle and nephew survived, yet these moments of crisis and anxiety remained vivid in Asma'u's memory and thirty-years later she was able to recall them and set them down in verse.

Because of the starvation and ill health in the community, the Shehu decided to retreat from Alkalawa and seek refuge further south. Muhammad Bello covered his retreat with a number of sharp rear-guard actions; eventually, after a month, the comparative safety of Sabon Gari was reached.

The indomitable spirit of the Shehu, his firm belief in the righteousness of his cause and the peerless support given him by his community soon led to a rallying of spirits. Once again Abdullahi and Muhammed Bello, uncle and nephew were at the forefront, each of them scoring decisive victories which stabilized the community's position. Both these men, Muhammed Bello in particular, played a big part in the development of Asma'u. The bond between brother and sister forged during the years of greatest anxiety and danger, was further strengthened by her marriage in 1807 to his great friend Gidado dan Laima.

Two years after her marriage Asma'u gave birth to her first son, Abdulkadir. In that same year Bello began to build the city of Sokoto and Asma'u moved there with her husband, Gidado.

Alkalawa had, by this time, been taken and the Caliphate established. The Shehu appointed emirs to provide spiritual and temporal leadership in the great Hausa states such as Kano and Katsina; near home he posted men qualified by learning, strength of character and commitment to Islamic ideals, to positions of authority under the Caliph.

In this way the tightly knit community, which adversity had tempered, split up geographically. The menfolk, used to riding long distances, still saw much of each other but the women now found themselves in the

confines of their homes often many miles apart.

Asma'u acquired a servant who acted as her messenger and confidant. Through her she kept in close touch with her mother, sisters and sisters-in-law and took up her education again. With a zeal for which she was to become famous, she devoted the early years of her marriage to pursuing her study of the Islamic sciences, perfecting her knowledge of Arabic, developing her poetic style and submitting herself to the disciplines of Sufism. In this she was helped and encouraged by her husband Gidado, himself a scholar of distinction, and her father the Shehu who valued her greatly for her industry, integrity and truthfulness.

As a young woman in her early twenties, she accompanied Muhammed Bello's daughter to Kano when she was taken there as the Emir Sulaiman's bride. The wedding party set out from Sokoto under heavy escort, the ladies mounted on mares. After about fifteen days travelling they reached Kano and were met some distance from the city by the bridegroom's party. The great cavalcade clattered through the narrow streets, the first time in her life that Asma'u had ever been in a great city of sun-baked clay buildings. Muhammed Bello had himself appointed Sulaiman; on Sulaiman's death, Asma'u's sister was married to his successor. The close link, thus established, has endured till this day.

Scholar

Shortly after her return from Kano, that which they most feared happened: the Shehu died, the inspired leader departed. Through his values, his leadership, his example and his courage he had guided the community. Asma'u who had written nothing during the Shehu's life-time, after his death began to compose her poems which consistently reflected the Shehu's ideals: in times of danger she roused the army's spirit with poems directed against the enemy, in contemplative moods she wrote on religious themes, in moments of academic brilliance she embroidered her own poetic threads into the poems of her contemporaries, in old age she wrote a dramatic poem of thanks for the overthrow of the son of her father's, all, but now turned despot. She wrote equally well in Arabic, Hausa and Fulfulde and her mastery of these three languages was not confined to an ability simply to write in them. She could compose poetry in any one of the three and effectively translate her work, complete with poetic idiom, into any of the other two. She also took her father's and brother's works and transposed the poetic conception into a stylistically convincing whole in another language thus establishing herself as a woman of outstanding intellectual ability.

It is important to note that although the language of scholarship was Arabic, Asma'u wrote much of her poetry in the vernacular, knowing that poetry is easier to memorize and transmit than prose and more quickly disseminated when written in vernacular tongues. Thus Asma'u's poetry should be viewed as a technique for spreading the basic tenets of the

Faith and the fundamental ideals of the Jihad.

With the Shehu gone, Asma'u devoted herself to the Jihadist cause and waged her own battle to keep alive the Shehu's idealism within the community.

Sokoto under Caliph Bello

"May God put down the rebellion of Sarkin Azibin Ibra and give us victory over him."

In 1882, the great Tuareg chief Ibra came to the very gates of Sokoto with a large army. From the market place near Gidado's house, looking north west across the flood plain of the river, the Tuareg camp fires could easily be seen. Asma'u's brother, the Caliph Bello had already sent his crier round the town calling men to arms and in every home preparations were made. Asma'u, true to the spirit of the occasion, composed a poem invoking Allah's assistance, two lines from which are quoted above. It was one of her first works of known date and she was twenty-eight years old.

The attack on Sokoto by the Tuaregs was part of a general rebellion which broke out on the death of the Shehu and the accession of Bello: the very existence of the caliphate was endangered.

Bello's first responsibility therefore was to put down the rebellion and preserve the territorial integrity of the caliphate. Thereafter his responsibility lay in consolidation while at the same time keeping alive the Shehu's idealism, on which the whole movement had been based.

His right-hand man was Asma'u's husband, Gidado whom he had appointed his *Waziri* or Chief Advisor.

In order to suppress the rebellion Bello had to mount a number of campaigns, and he prepared for these carefully, relying on intelligence reports received from his espionage agents: Bello was a master tactician.

The Caliph led many of the campaigns personally, and we have a picture of him going into battle, written by Asma'u.

"The standard-bearers turned to face the enemy and unfurled the flags

Then Bello mounted and rode forth serene
Ringed by his men bearing aloft sharpened spears
And naked sword blades which flashed in the sunlight."

Defence of the realm, therefore, was one of Bello's extremely important tasks. To achieve his aims Bello had to be both shrewd and tough; his administration had to be firm and decisive. The ideological aims of the community, as we first saw them twenty years previously, had not changed. Self-discipline at all times and probity in public affairs was the watchword.

Bello was described as "a man who would fight all day and then devote the night to study and writing". Gidado and he would discuss affairs of

state late into the night watched over by the Caliph's trusted woman slave, Yargulma who, interestingly, also had apartments in Gidado's house; this shows how intricate the web was, which bound the two households together.

In this disciplined, alert and totally committed atmosphere Asma'u matured and put her boundless energy to use as an authoress and teacher, for it was when she was a young woman that she began her life's work of educating women. We can picture her dressed from head to toe in cloth striped with blue, white and red, a silver bracelet on her arm and coral beads round her throat. Her hair plaited and probably razored at the front to enhance the height of her forehead, her eyes darkened with antimony and her hands and feet coloured with henna. Her room would have been decorated with carved calabashes. Always within call would have been her much loved maid servant who helped to look after the children, visited friends and relatives on her behalf and regulated the flow of visitors to her quarters.

Asma'u supervised the work of the women servants one of whose main tasks was to prepare food for the day-to-day requirements of the household and for emergencies. For example, men setting out on an expedition were required to take with them seven day's rations which would be made up of dried meat or biltong and "murje" a kind of enriched dried milk powder.

Throughout the year, groups of women came to her for instruction. They came in mixed age groups, the young along with the elderly, and travelled under the leadership of a senior woman distinguished in travel by her large straw hat which is usually part of male attire. Singing religious songs they approached her house, where she taught them how to perform their religious duties and how, through shunning lies, slander, enmity, boasting, envy, adultery, theft and self-esteem, they could purify themselves. Her more able pupils read Arabic, Law and Theology with her.

Her kindly manner, clarity of expression and personal example encouraged women to come in greater and greater numbers. On her death, her sister, Maryam, then living in the Shehu's family house, took over her pupils and the tradition thus established has lasted to this day. The sisterhoods piously still make their way through the streets of Sokoto under the leadership of their senior women who are called in Hausa "Jagaba" or "Jaji" and are still distinguished by their large straw hats. They go to pray at Asma'u's tomb.

Apart from her household duties and teaching she wrote books and poetry. One of her major early works is "Tanbihul Gafilina" written a year earlier than her poem against the Tuareg chief, Ibra. Shortly afterwards she wrote her first (so far collected) elegy written on the death of her uncle Abdullahi, a most learned man and the finest poet of his generation. In the poem she says:

The departure of great men is proof that this world is only a
transitory place.
For were it otherwise, the saints and prophets
would not depart from it.
Shehu was the sun
Abdullahi was the moon, and
Bello is their heir, may Allah preserve him."

The years 1818 to 1836 must have been very happy ones in spite of the death of one of her sons due to smallpox and the departure of Gidado in 1827 to stem the advance of the Borno armies and the other campaigns which had to be fought to preserve the caliphate. Her idealism, unblurred by the passage of time, found fulfilment in Bello's reign.

In 1837 the caliphate was again threatened by a large army under the joint commander of the chiefs of Azbin, Gobir, Maradi and Tsibiri. Bello was at Wurno, the city he founded to the north-east of Sokoto and with typical resoluteness, he took to the field for what was to be the last time. He tracked down the enemy and in a pitched battle killed two of the enemy chiefs whose heads were then put on display. Ruthlessly Bello hunted out survivors and before departing for Wurno he appointed governors to hold the northern and eastern frontiers to ensure peace.

When he returned home he fell mortally sick; after months of illness he died on the 26th of October, 1837. His death caused Asma'u great anguish which is reflected in five poems she wrote about him. She had admired him all her life and from the outset she had realized his greatness. As a little girl she had seen him sword in hand defend the families at Alkalawa. She had married his life-long companion and friend Gidado and was closely involved in all that was happening at the caliphate's centre. She wrote:

He was very learned and a teacher
And feared Allah in private as well as in public.
By the sweat of his brow he earned his daily bread.
He forbade the abuse of office.
He had a quiet demeanour
He accepted everyone, Fulani, Azbins, Hausas and Arabs and
made them equally welcome.
He was reasonable and accepted the apologies and excuses of
those who made mistakes.
But criminals he committed straight into the hands of the Law.
He was merciful to the poor and to orphans.
However his greatest strength lay in his remarkable ability as an
administrator and a tactician.

For Asma'u Bello's death was the end of an era.

The Years of Endeavour

Gidado was an old man when Bello's successor, Atiku, became caliph.

Saddened by the death of Bello his life-long leader and companion he could not face taking office under Atiku, a brave man but of a different temperament from his predecessor. He therefore handed over his interest in state matters to his and Asma'u's eldest son, Abdulkadir.

He attended to his other tasks which included responsibility for the upkeep of the Shehu's house in which a number of his descendants were still living. He was also responsible for the repair of the two juma'at mosques and the tombs of departed jihadists. He was a most hospitable and kindly person, well known for his generosity and courtesy. It was he who had accommodated Commander Clapperton when he visited Sokoto in the 1820s.

One of his major occupations during his semi-retirement was the collecting and collating of the works of the Shehu and Bello, an occupation in which he was assisted by his wife Asma'u. He also wrote two of his major works about Bello and drew on Asma'u's memory and data.

She herself continued to write and shortly after Bello's death composed what is probably her best-known work, an epic poem on the Hijra called "Gewaye", a poem familiar to generations of people in Sokoto.

Atiku faced the same problems which had confronted Bello, attack from without and the necessity to conserve and consolidate the caliphate. Within five years he had been killed in battle, his place now been taken by Bello's son, Aliyu, a charming and hospitable man who reigned for 17 years and had the closest bond of friendship with Abdulkadir, Asma'u's son, who was his Waziri.

The stage seemed to be set for a re-enactment of Bello and Gidado's achievements. May we suppose that this is what Asma'u felt?

Certainly a good start was made and almost immediately after Aliyu became Caliph, Asma'u had cause to write a jubilant poem of thanksgiving for the victory of her nephew over the chief of Gobir. Aliyu, side-whiskered and genial, daringly rode across a waterless desert, singing Fulfulde songs and taking with him, 1,000 water-carrying camels; by this feat he out-flanked his enemy and defeated him.

When Asma'u was 56 Gidado died leaving her to live on in his house for another fifteen years. It might have been considered a suitable time for her to go into semi-retirement. For over fifty years she had lived at the centre of events as the daughter of the Shehu, sister of the Caliph Bello, wife of his Waziri Gidado, mother of the then Waziri and aunt of the new Caliph. She had been writing for a quarter of a century, had assisted her husband in his work of classifying the Shehu's and Bello's works and had organised women's education in the Caliphate. She had also born six sons. However, Asma'u was enduring and indefatigable and within her still burned the desire to keep alive the Shehu's idealism.

One by one her friends and relatives died and she has preserved the memory of many of them in her elegies. In these "marthiya" as they are known in Arabic, she constantly underlined the Sufic qualities which were considered so worthy of emulation. Modesty, self effacement,

humility, patience and compassion are always the qualities mentioned together with piety and righteousness. In no poem is there mention of the martial arts: no man is praised for such heroic qualities as swordsmanship, horsemanship or powers of physical endurance. No woman is praised for her beauty and loveliness.

When her close friend Aisha died Asma'u wrote of her:

"Aisha was pious and religious
She was generous, learned and just
She brought up orphans
And took charge of widows and other women in distress".

Of her cousin Haliru she wrote:

"I weep for him because of his compassionate nature
I weep for him because of his knowledge of religion and the Law
In private he looked to the purification of his religious obligations
And on State business, whether war, welfare or education, he
proved to be efficient".

She continued to write on religious matters, about Sufism, the Day of Judgement, the Traditions of the Prophet and so on. At the age of 63 she produced an elegant poem modelled on one composed by the Shehu at the age of ten. One of her undated works is her infinitely clever treading of additional lines into a poem in Fulfulde by the Azbin scholar, Muhammed Tukur.

By this time her reputation as a woman of great learning had spread abroad. Visiting scholars composed verses in her honour and she replied in kind. In one such exchange she is described as:

"Patient, wise, learned intelligent and pious heir to her parents
greatness."

and her poetry is compared, according to convention, to beautiful daughters of a lovely mother. Asma'u graciously replied in verse:

"My poetry no way exceeds yours.

In no way is your poetry inferior to mine.
May Allah bring you good fortune and defend you from evil.
My heart-felt wishes go with you."

One of the most famous of all the Jihad poems "Tabbat Hakika" was composed by the Shehu towards the end of his life. Asma'u translated it into Hausa and *post polu son*, Iza added *tamisi* (extra lines) to the poem. In the northern States from Adamawa to Sokoto, there is not likely to be an Islamic scholar or teacher today who has not heard "Tabbat Hakika".

Meanwhile as far as the political affairs of the caliphate were concerned all was not well. Aliyu was not of the same calibre as his father Bello and he could not keep the dissident chiefs under control. What is more he could not adequately defend the territorial integrity of the caliphate.

The valiant Musdafa, Asma'u's brother-in-law at Salame, had his city plundered twice. Asma'u wrote a poem startling in its intensity:

"I come to Allah on whom I depend for he has
said he will listen to the prayers of
supplicants who aid religion and follow
the Sunna. Protect Caliph Aliyu and give
him victory over the unbelievers."

Then follows a list of towns of the dissidents: each one she prefaces with "destroy" which, in constant repetition, adds force to the poem.

Almost at the end of Aliyu's reign she wrote a long poem about Bello's last battle, an event which had taken place twenty years previously. In the poem she underlines Bello's resourcefulness, spirit and courage. She exalts in the ruthlessness shown that day and seems to be pointing out a lesson:

Ali's head was skewered on a spear
The drums beat out
"Ali's dead
He will never return."

The enemy host was routed on that hill top
The hyenas and vultures asked each other,
"Who has set out this feast for us?"

This is not the poetry of an old and dejected woman. We must assume that the hopes she entertained in Bello's son and her own Abdulkadir were not borne out. Disappointed she may have been, but dispirited never. She remained unquenched and indomitable to the end. Her last poem, written at the age of 72, reads with the freshness of youth:

"I give thanks to Allah who has brought retribution on the lawless
wanton destroyer, Yalli the shamer of Muslims"

Considering that Yalli was the son of her father's life-long friend, these are strong words indeed and show her lack of concern for family ties when confronted with gross abuse of office.

It was in the reign of her nephew Ahmadu that Asma'u died in 1865. Her body was taken to her father's house and she lies buried in a room next to his: a singular honour.

She was distinguished by her birth and in a community noted for its piety and high standards of learning she was an acknowledged scholar and leader of religious thought. With her pen she actively waged the jihadist cause and proved her versatility by addressing herself to all levels of society in the language and style each could most easily understand. She turned her happy married home unto a centre for women's learning to which her pupils came from far afield. Her integrity, truthfulness and intelligence made her a valued daughter, sister and wife. Wise, modest, industrious and innovative, she was deeply respected during her lifetime

and is revered to this day throughout the western Sudan.
My Allah have mercy on her soul. Amen

Asma'u's Works

Alhaji Dr. Junaidu, Waziri Sokoto, translated and explained to us many of the forty-four of Asma'u's works which he has in his collection. He estimates that more than twice this number of her books and poems are still in private hands; gradually, it is hoped, they will all be traced and photo-copied. At the time of writing, the Waziri is studying manuscripts brought from Salame where Asma'u's sister, Hadijatu, lived. She taught Asma'u and she too was an authoress.

Here is a list of Asma'u's works:

Elegies (Marthiya)

- 1830 on Mallam Abdullahi Fodio
- 1837 on Caliph Mohammed Bello
- 1839 on Mallam Buhari
- 1850 on her husband Gidado dan Laima
- 1855 on Fadinatu, her sister
- 1855 on her servant
- 1856 on Na Inna
- 1857 on Musdafa
- 1857 on Aishatu, her friend
- 1859 on Zaharatu
- 1860 on Hauwwa'u, the women's religious leader
- 1862 on Mallam Haliru.

Books and Poems on Religious Themes:

- 1820 Tanbihul Gafalina
- 1830 Surorin Kur'ani
- 1832 Wa'azi
- 1839 In Praise of the Prophet
- 1839 Tabshir al Ikhwan
- 1852 Quasidatu Tauhidi
- 1858 Wa'azi (ii).
- 1862 Lahira.

Others

- 1822 Prayer for Victory over the Chief of Azbin
- 1830 Prayer for Victory over the Chief of Talata Mafara
- 1837 Famous Women
- 1837 Caliph Bello's Character
- 1837 Admonition to wailing Women
- 1839 Wurno

- 1839 Gewaye
1844 Thanksgiving for Victory over the Chief of Gobir
1856 A Poem on the Shehu's pattern
1855 Prayer for Victory over the Chief of Gobir
1858 The Battle of Gawakuke (Gazawatahu almashuru)
1860 A Poem to Sa'ad on his Return from Mecca
1863 Prayer for Victory over Balkore
1865 Thanks for the Downfall of Muhammed Yalli.

Undated

- Tahamis on a poem by Muhammed Tukur
Poem from Alhaji Ahmed Shangidi and her reply
Poem on Alkiyama
Narsiya on Modibo Ali
Narsiya on Mallam Dandi
Poems written between Asma'u and Aliyu dan Ibrahim Ahijo
A poem on Sufism
Tabbat Hakika, a translation by Asma'u of the Shehu's poem in Fulfulde.

There is also a list of the places from which Asma'u's women students came and a *marthiya* on Asma'u written by her brother, Isa Maikware, who after her death translated some of her poems from Fulfulde into Hausa.

Poem in Fulfulde

Allah Almighty, all powerful: he who asserts there is more than one
God will perish
The one Allah Almighty, nothing is perfect except from Him
One who says he requires nothing of Allah is either ignorant or an
unbeliever
All those who seek his help will receive it, for Allah does not forbid
people making a request
I pray Allah will, show me the way of religion and that I will keep it
till I die.
All the pure, who forgets nothing, those whom he forgives find peace.
May He bless us and show us the path, may He help us to remain
one united people.
We pray for victory, that the rebellion of Ibra may be overcome
We pray for forgiveness in this world and the next.
Call upon Allah in everything, so that things which are too difficult
may be made easy.
Pray to Allah, say your rosary and pray for forgiveness and give
thanks.
Look at his generosity — it is unbounded. His magnificence is

infinite.

We give thanks to Allah, we pray to our Lord of the Universe.

Explanation

This poem was written in Fulfulde.

In 1823 when the Tuareg Chief, Ibra, attacked Sokoto, Nana visited her brother, the Caliph Bello, and was in some distress. He wrote for her an *aya* from the Quoran which offered consolation and hope.

She immediately sat down and composed this poem; she took the *aya* and used each letter to form a line of poetry thus there are 14 letters in the *aya* and 14 lines of poetry.

The *aya* can be seen written down the right hand side of the poem.

Poem in Arabic

Translation

Welcome: we greet you with respect, ceremonial address and the finest words

We greet you: your honour is blameless, free from any sort of disgrace, calumny or controversy

Your exemplary life has enriched you and there is everlasting pleasure for you.

Explanation

These couplets were written in *Arabic*

A visiting scholar to Sokoto wrote some verses in her praise and, in the spirit of a passage in the Quoran which enjoins people to reply graciously, to salutations, she composed these very elegant lines.

Poem in Hausa

Translation

Let us praise Allah, whose existence, like His mercy and generosity, is beyond doubt

Those created by Him know these facts are indisputable

Give thanks to Allah Almighty

One God who is undoubtedly sufficient for all mankind.

Explanation

This poem was written in *Hausa*. The original poem, which is very famous, was written by Shehu Usman Dan Fodio in Fulfulde. In the original each verse was two lines in length. Nana translated

the poem, versified it and added three lines to each verse, making each one five lines in length. This latter technique is called *tahamis*.

The authors wish to acknowledge the debt they owe to the eminent scholar Alhaji Dr. Junaidu, Wazirin Sokoto.

Iyalode Efunsetan Aniwura
(Owner of Gold)

Bolanle Awe



Efunsetan, Iyalode
 One who has horses and rides them not,
 The child who walks in a graceful fashion.
 Adekemi Ogunrin!
 The great hefty woman who adorns her legs with beads
 Whose possessions surpass those of the Ààre
 Owner of several puny slaves in the farm.
 Owner of many giant slaves in the market.
 One who has bullets and gunpowder.
 Who has gunpowder as well as guns,
 And spends money like a conjurer,
 The Iyalode who instills fear into her equals.
 The rich never give their money to the poor;
 The Iyalode never gives her wrappers to the lazy.

Ibadan was one of the most distinguished Yoruba towns in the nineteenth century. Tradition often attributes its greatness to the emergence there of many famous warriors such as Oluyole, Ibikunle, Ogunmola and Ààre Latosa whose names now adorn many of the streets of that town. The development of Ibadan did not however, rest in the hands of the warriors alone. There also featured in its history some very distinguished women who contributed to its growth. The most famous among them was Efunsetan Aniwura (owner of gold), who rose to become Iyalode, or leader of all the women in Ibadan. Generally, not much written information is available about these famous women because most of our history is based on oral tradition i.e. accounts passed down from generation to generation by word of mouth — and these tend to concentrate on spectacular events such as battles and memorable deeds of famous warriors. We are, however, fortunate in the case of Iyalode Efunsetan, who was so distinguished that many legends have been created around her and these have formed the basis of a successful play written by Akinwumi Ishola.

Also there are still living in Ibadan a few people who remember her. The most informative of these people is Oluwo Labosinde who is now about 100 years old and who as a young child knew Iyalode Efunsetan whose compound was two doors away from his own. It is from his accounts as well as the legends that it has been possible to piece together her life history.

Early Life

Although Efunsetan achieved fame and distinction in Ibadan, she was originally an Egba woman from Abeokuta. Like many of the older inhabitants of the town in the nineteenth century, her parents immigrated into Abeokuta; for them Abeokuta was a new home founded as a place of refuge about 1830 after the destruction of their original home in what is known as the Egba forest, an area which now virtually embraces all those parts of the Yoruba country presently occupied by such important towns as Ibadan, Oyo, Ijaye and their very many suburbs. Up till the beginning of the nineteenth century the Egba still inhabited that area; but in the early 1820s wars broke out between them on the one hand and the combined forces of their Ijebu and Ife neighbours as well as the Oyo-Yoruba from the northern part of the Yoruba country on the other.

The causes of the wars were varied; but two factors were important. The overseas slave trade was becoming important in this part of the world and it led to an increased demand for slaves which had to be met by the Yoruba from among themselves; in fact, many Yoruba people were captured in wars such as this and carried overseas during this period. The second factor was the collapse of the kingdom of the Oyo-Yoruba due to its own internal weaknesses and the invasion of the Hausa-Fulani who were trying to spread Islam from their stronghold at Ilorin. The Oyo-Yoruba lost their homes in the northern part of the Yoruba country to the Hausa-Fulani and so moved southwards in search of new homes. They therefore joined forces with the Ijebu and the Ife and destroyed, first the Owu kingdom, and then the Egba settlements. They made their homes at Ibadan, Ijaye, Oyo etc. and the Egba had to found a new settlement in Abeokuta.

It is not clear whether Efunsetan was born in the Egba forest or not, but it is certain that her parents met each other and got married there. Her father came from Orile Ikija which was one of the larger Egba settlements. According to an eye witness account, it was built on two hills and before its destruction, had six gates leading from it to different towns. Her mother was an Ife woman and it is not unlikely that her two parents met in the course of trade between the two towns. They both belonged to very distinguished families whose connections were to stand Efunsetan in good stead later in life. Her father was from the same family that produced Ogundipe, one of the most distinguished Egba warriors of the later part of the nineteenth century; her mother was the sister of Oluyole, one of the powerful warrior immigrant chiefs who founded the new town of Ibadan.

With the destruction of Orile Ikija, Efunsetan's parents moved into Abeokuta and settled in the northeast part of the town which came to be known as Ikija in keeping with the practice adopted by other settlers from places like Igbein, Ake, Ikereku who called their new homes after their old ones. The exact date of her birth is unknown but if the traditions are

correct about her having died in her middle age in 1874, she would have been born in the middle to late 1820s. She was named according to traditional rites. Since her parents were devotees of Obatala, the divinity of creation and Ogun, the divinity of iron, she was given the names of Efunsetan (Efun i.e. owner of the white symbol [Obatala] is ready to do wonders) and Ogunrin (Ogun has come) respectively, in deference to those two deities. Like all Yoruba children, she was also given the praise name Adekemi (the crown pets me).

We do not have detailed information about her childhood, but all evidence seems to suggest that, in the main, Efunsetan had a conventional upbringing. She received the type of training that was given to the average Yoruba girl of that period. As a child she would learn to pay her respects to the elders in the household; as she grew older she would be taught some of the household tasks so as to make her a useful member of the family. She would learn to fetch water from the stream, sweep the compound, grind pepper, carry firewood, learn to cook. Later, she would, like all Yoruba girls, also be expected to engage in buying and selling so as to be able to fend for herself in the future. It is not unlikely that like most Egba girls she learnt to make *Adire* cloth (the tie and dye), but Efunsetan found her vocation in the world of trade. At first, she would like most young girls sit at her mother's stall and learn the technique of haggling. Later, to gain practical experience she would be sent out to hawk her wares. As she grew older she would be shown the more complex side of business operations in the Yoruba country.

Fortunately, Abeokuta of those days provided her with ample opportunities and exposed her to many new educational experiences which would stand her in good stead in her chosen field. Within the first ten years of its existence the town had to fight for its survival. Its neighbours, the Ijebu, who were mainly traders, saw in the new settlement which was also well placed for trade with the coast, a rival and attacked it unsuccessfully in 1832 in what came to be known as the Owiwi war; again in 1835, they joined forces with the new settlers at Ibadan to launch another unsuccessful attack against it. In an attempt to gain access to the coast, the Egba too had to subjugate during this decade (1830s-1840s) the Awori and the Egbado who tried to block their road to the coast, especially to Porto Novo and Badagry, the two important outlets to the outside world. Such warfares revealed to Efunsetan, as in the case of the Owiwi war when the day was saved by the timely supply to the Egba of gunpowder from Lagos by King Adele, the importance of imported ammunition for military survival and therefore as an article of commerce. They also underlined the strategic importance of those coastal towns such as Lagos, Porto Novo and Badagry from where guns could be imported both to the traders and the hinterland towns which they supplied.

But while fighting for its survival, Abeokuta also became the reception centre for the first group of liberated Yoruba slaves from overseas. Between 1836 and 1842 there was an influx of about 3000 such im-

migrants into Abeokuta mostly from Sierra Leone. In their wake came also the European missionaries, the Anglicans, the Wesleyans and finally in 1850 the Baptists. Their activities not only introduced new ideas into Abeokuta, but also affected the landscape; for instance, by 1846 Reverend Townsend, the first Anglican missionary, had built a chapel and a few houses for christian converts in the town. Such activities, both on the military and social planes, provided a most stimulating environment for Efunsetan to learn the art of buying and selling. At first most of her trading would be confined to the markets in Abeokuta, but in her late teens, she would like most girls of her age, be venturing farther afield — first in the rural markets surrounding Abeokuta, where farmers brought their products for sale, and then later, as she gained more confidence she would join the army of traders going from one town to another.

Such trading did not, however, prevent her from settling down and making a home like other young women. Unfortunately, we do not have much information about her marital life, but we do know that she got married to one of her townsmen at Abeokuta. For the Yoruba, the most important factor in marriage is procreation of children. Efunsetan was rather unlucky in this respect. Some claim that she had no child at all, others that she had only one child who died in youth. One fact however stands out; the fact that the marriage was not blessed with children prevented it from being a long-lasting one. As if it were in consolation, Efunsetan turned increasingly to her trade. As she became more experienced, so she gathered around her a circle of friends who were also successful traders. In particular, there were three other women traders — Yade, Efundunke and Olojo — who were of the same age group and with whom she went to the Ibadan market regularly. Soon they realised that the opportunities in Abeokuta for large-scale trading were limited and began to find Ibadan more attractive.

Move to Ibadan

Ibadan was founded around 1828 primarily as a camp for the soldiers who drove the Egba from the Egba forest. By the middle of the nineteenth century, however, this settlement had been transformed from a mere military base into a prosperous town. Its main architect was Basorun Oluyole. By the time he died in 1847, Ibadan had conquered many of the neighbouring agricultural towns such as Erunmu, Sagamu, Igboora, Apomu etc. which therefore supplied it with abundant foodstuffs for its consumption and export. However, Oluyole's reputation as a distinguished soldier and the avenues open to those ambitious for military distinction attracted to Ibadan so many youngmen that the town soon became known as a "republic of warriors". It thus provided in abundance three things which traders wanted — surplus agricultural produce for export, a good market for guns and ammunition as well as war captives who could be sold as domestic slaves. Moreover Ibadan was well placed

for trade. As its name Ibadan (near the savannah) indicates, it is situated on the edge of the grassland and is therefore a suitable meeting point for exchanging the products of the forest region as well as the local and imported articles from the coast on the one hand, with those from the savannah on the other.

While Ibadan enjoyed all these advantages, Abeokuta was relatively unsettled. After the death of Sodeke, the architect of the new settlement of Abeokuta, in 1845, there was no firm leadership and the warrior chiefs struggled with the civil chiefs for power. The town's area of jurisdiction was, in contrast to that of Ibadan, severely circumscribed by the new settlements founded by those who had taken over their old homes. Abeokuta had also incurred a few dangerous enemies. Its support in the dynastic struggles in Lagos for the leader of one of the factions, Akitoye, had led to raids on the town by supporters of the faction led by Kosoko. On its western flank were also the Dahomey who saw Abeokuta as a new rival for leadership in the south-western part of the Yoruba country. Fear of attacks by the famous Amazon women warriors of Dahomey therefore created a great deal of instability within the town.

In the circumstances, dynamic and energetic traders like Efunsetan found Ibadan a more accommodating environment. Indeed there were many precedents for the settlement of the Egba in Ibadan. After the period of wars many of them had come back to their old homes, while a few such as the Aboke family had actually been invited back to continue the worship of Oke Badan, the hill believed to be inhabited by the titular deity of Ibadan people. For Efunsetan it was another home away from home. At Oja'ba, the oldest part of Ibadan, was the compound of Oluyole, Efunsetan's maternal relation. Here Oluyole, a distinguished warrior had, in the tradition of Ibadan warrior chiefs, established himself as a successful trader supplying his brother soldiers with guns and gunpowder on credit at the outbreak of war and receiving on their return from battle, war captives in payment. Efunsetan had always stayed in his compound and he had always stood surety for her in her business dealings in Ibadan. It is therefore not surprising that in moving to Ibadan Efunsetan decided to stay with Oluyole. Indeed this was also a shrewd move as Oja'ba was and still is the largest market in Ibadan and would therefore be within easy reach. The exact period when she actually moved to Ibadan is not certain, but it must have been in the 1860s when Ibadan was rapidly becoming the most important town in the Yoruba country.

The Trader

With Ibadan as her new base, her trading activities got a new lease of life. When she was in Abeokuta, her trading activities had had only four or five focal points — Ibadan and Abeokuta in the hinterland, and Porto Novo, Badagry and Lagos on the coast. But with Ibadan as base she was able to widen the scope of her trading operations and exploit extensively

the resources of the Yoruba country and the area beyond by getting her trade products from the actual sources. Her trade was of two types, the coastal trade which was between the coast and the rest of the Yoruba country, and the trade within the Yoruba country itself. For the coastal trade her main customers were overseas traders who bought what she brought from the hinterland and supplied what she took back. Of the three coastal centres, Lagos was the most important. At first the traders here were mainly the Portuguese and the Brazilians who were primarily interested in the slave trade. But after 1851 when there was a vigorous attempt to stop the slave trade, other traders began to appear on the Lagos scene. They included Germans, Frenchmen, Austrians, the British, and finally the liberated slaves from Brazil and Sierra-Leone who decided to make their homes in Lagos. Unlike the Portuguese and Brazilians who had only barracoons in Lagos as collecting points for slaves coming down by canoe from the River Ogun, this new set of traders built trading factories in Lagos, particularly on the Marina, and some places were named after them such as Apongbon (the Red Beard) which was named after McCoskry who had a flaming red beard. The goods which they demanded from the Yoruba hinterland were not very many but they were very important. At first the main item consisted of slaves who were taken away by the Portuguese and Brazilian traders to work on plantations in South America. Some locally woven cloths were also imported mainly for use by these slaves. Later, with the influx of the other traders whom we have mentioned other commodities were added to the list — the most important of which were palm oil and palm kernel which were much in demand in the new factories of Europe, as well as some quantities of ivory.

The list of articles which Efunsetan and her co-traders got from these overseas traders was a long one and reflected a great variety of needs in the Yoruba country: tobacco which came from Brazil and was in great demand for smoking, snuffing and medicinal purposes; textiles of all types; velvet, shirting, wax prints; special beads — coral and segi which were new items of clothing and ornamentation; salt, an important commodity, as the salt produced in the Yoruba country was inadequate and not of as good a quality as that imported from overseas; all types of strong liquor particularly rum and schnapps brought particularly by the Portuguese who also sold special casks (Sago) for bottling the local palm wine and metal boxes. But these were in the main luxury goods. The most important commodity during that period consisted of guns and gunpowder which the Yoruba soldiers needed for their warfare. With such weapons went knives and other types of cutlery.

Alongside this coastal trade went a very intricate trade network to meet the needs of various parts of the Yoruba country. Goods were taken from areas where they were surplus to areas of scarcity. From the Ibarapa district in the west of the Yoruba country came melons and yam flour. Beans and yams came from the Ibadan area. These foodstuffs were taken by Efunsetan to the Egba in Abeokuta and the indigenous inhabitants of

Lagos. Woven cloth came from Iseyin, Ibadan and Oyo for the same markets. Kolanuts and locally woven mats came from Ijesa district for Ibadan markets and the coast. Livestock, particularly goats, sheep, turkeys etc. came from Ilorin. Markets outside the Yoruba country also supplied it with some of its needs. From the north of Ilorin came bicarbonate of soda (kaun) for cooking and domestic purposes, natron for cosmetics and beads from Bida. Slaves also featured in these trading operations; apart from those taken overseas, the Yoruba, in the absence of hired labour, used slaves who could be more appropriately regarded as the domestic servants of today. They performed most of the household tasks, worked on the farms, acted as porters etc.

This extensive trading demanded a very efficient organisation and a great deal of energy, for trading then was a tedious and exacting affair. Traders moved about on foot from one town to another and carried some of their wares on their heads. The wealthier ones often hired porters to carry their excess luggage. The journey itself often took a few days and meant stopping overnight in various places on the route to eat, sleep and sometimes to change porters. Fortunately there were a large number of small settlements called *Aroje* (stop and eat) on the way for the comfort of the travellers. The journey from Lagos to Ibadan provides a good example of the rigours of trading during this period. The actual journey normally took about five days whether the route taken was overland or by the Ogun river. The more usual course was by canoe on the River Ogun, and this often meant spending at least a night or two on its banks. The stopping place for the continuation of the journey first to Abeokuta and then to Ibadan was Agbonmaya and here traders were expected to pay their toll dues before the continuation of their journey. Travellers would then need to spend another two days on the road before getting to Ibadan. But travelling could still be even more rigorous particularly in war time. At such times, traders tended to travel in caravans which were given military protection by paid soldiers who acted as escorts. But in spite of such protection the traders still ran the risk of being captured and of being detained in enemy territory as a reprisal measure until the end of the war. Very often too, the roads were closed to them and they had to find alternative but usually very circuitous routes to their destination and therefore spent many more days on road.

But although such difficulties made trading within the Yoruba country a most challenging venture, Efunsetan took all the obstacles in her stride, and with time she became established as one of the leading traders of the day in Ibadan. Gradually she moved from the ranks of small-time retailers and joined the guild of wholesalers (the *alarobo*) who in Ibadan formed a kind of reception centre for goods coming into town, acted as hosts and brokers for those bringing them, also as distributors to the retailers, and in the main determined the prices of goods. Her position became primarily that of a supervisor of a trading empire which was now manned by her servants who were largely her domestic slaves. These were the people

who travelled all over the Yoruba country and beyond to bring her the commodities most in demand in the markets. They went to Bida for natron, they drove livestock to Abeokuta, they manned her own canoes plying the Ogun river and were used in every capacity to further her trade interests.

With their assistance she also moved from the ranks of middlemen traders taking goods from one part of the country to supply other parts, to become a producer of these goods. Some of her slaves, particularly the women were weavers using the upright loom to weave the strong Kijipa which was not only in demand within the country but in South America because of its durability. Others particularly from the Ijesa kingdom wove mats to be sold in various Yoruba markets. Some specialised in the production of cosmetics. They planted the lali (henna) for ornamentally staining the hands and feet of new brides and young women. They ground osun (camwood) and prepared adi (special palm kernel oil) for rubbing on babies, young brides and fashionable women. Food production was also another area in which they were engaged. By the time Efunsetan died in 1874, she had three large farms outside Ibadan on which there were said to be no less than a hundred slaves each. They planted corn, yams, vegetables etc. most of which they sold not only in Ibadan markets but in Abeokuta and the coastal markets.

Such extensive trading operations required great commercial acumen and Efunsetan demonstrated her innate ability in this field. Although she was illiterate, she had a good memory in which she kept all her accounts and maintained a firm control over all her business operations. It is not unlikely that like her equally famous contemporary, Iyalode Tinubu in Abeokuta, she employed literate clerks to conduct her business with Lagos; for Ibadan also received its share of immigrant returnees like 'Daddy Showers', Erinoti, Pillar alias Labotoki and 'Mammy Solape', and the Anglican mission was also well established there. Indeed the most senior African among the Anglicans, Olubi, was her compatriot from Ikija in Abeokuta, and like her cousin Ogundipe, she had taken an interest in their activities and had been very helpful in redeeming newly converted Christian slaves. Her commercial success however depended largely on her shrewd business sense. Tradition relates that her wealth was built on the tobacco trade. It is on record that she bought up most of the imported tobacco on the coast at a time when there was a glut, and gradually released it on the market when it became scarce and she had a virtual monopoly.

She was also a brave business woman who often took risks. She was noted for extending credit facilities to the warriors whom she gave guns and ammunition when they were going on a military expedition in the hope that they would bring back slaves in exchange. She herself had earned a good reputation for credit worthiness, for her actual liquid capital was limited. Cash in those days consisted of cowry shells which were too heavy to carry and most of the trading was between distant parts

of the country. She was always allowed when buying slaves to pay a certain amount as advance (Ibokun) and to pay the balance later, very often in the form of guns and ammunition and other trade items which she got in exchange for the slaves in Lagos.

The Iyalode

With so much success in the world of trade, she began to attract attention and respect as one of the people of note in Ibadan, for she had invested her profits in those things which were regarded at that time as symbols of wealth and affluence. As we have indicated she already had three farms which were manned by her domestic slaves. She had two grazing fields within town where her Hausa slaves tended her cattle. In her household were over 200 domestic slaves and hangers-on performing all types of service on her behalf. Her personal property in the form of adornment was even more astonishing. She could boast of basket loads of beads — Okun, Lagidigba, Iyun, Segi, Opoto, the main jewellery worn by women in those days. In addition she had a jewel-smith in Lagos who made her silver trinkets, and the *Asude* in Ibadan made her brass and copper bracelets. She could also boast of a good wardrobe made up largely of locally woven cloth ranging from the durable Kijipa which came from the women's loom to the ceremonial cloths — Sanyan, Etu, Alari — which were woven by men. She also had a large collection of imported textiles, particularly the rich plush velvet in bright colours of green, red, and blue as well as a great variety of brocades.

With so much wealth, various honours which could be discharged only by those who had the wherewithal gradually came her way. Recognition first came to her from within her kinship unit in Ibadan. With the death of her relative and benefactor, Oluyole, she emerged as the most outstanding personality in the compound and on her was conferred the title of Mogaji (leader) of that compound. This was a rare honour as it is a position that is still normally reserved for a man; even then it is always conferred on a distinguished person in the lineage who has exceptional qualities of leadership. He must be mature, articulate, particularly in putting across the view of the lineage at public meetings as their spokesman, and he must be wealthy enough to maintain that status. As the head of the lineage, he must be prepared to provide a large part of the necessities from his own pocket for the main Yoruba traditional ceremonies — naming of a child, weddings, funerals etc. He was also expected to see to the physical maintenance of the compound, to take care of their common lineage properties, to care for the old, the orphans and other hangers-on who are resident in the compound.

It is to Efunsetan's credit that she carried out these new duties with great success. Traces of the remarkable changes which she brought about in Oluyole's compound still remain. From a small humble dwelling, it was transformed into one of the bigger compounds at Oja'ba. Her

popularity and success attracted to the compound many members of the lineage from Abeokuta and Ife. In addition to these, room had to be found for her increasing number of slaves and dependants. It is not surprising that during her period as Mogaji much of the open space in the compound was built up and by the time of her death there were about eight separate courtyards in the compound, each having eight rooms. The most notable of these were the two courtyards which included the hall (Igbejo) where she presided over family matters, and the *Basa*, a type of shrine in which she kept beautifully carved figures depicting the gods whom she worshipped, particularly Sango, (god of thunder), Orisa Oko (god of agriculture), Yemoja etc.

Her service to her lineage drew the attention of the Ibadan populace and their leaders to her and led to the conferment on her of the highest chieftaincy title a woman could hold in the town — that of Iyalode. Her contribution to the well being of her lineage was seen not only as evidence of her wealth, but also of her potential influence in the town: for a teeming compound such as she had was a measure of her following and therefore of her popularity and acceptance within the town. And these were the important factors that qualified one for the highest honours in Ibadan: these same factors that obtained for the man also obtained for the woman except for one important difference. Whereas the man was supposed to have proved himself worthy of service by his action in the battlefield both as a fighter and a leader, the woman was instead expected to show that she was capable of making contributions to the war effort in other ways, and in this Efunsetan was not found wanting. Many of the warrior chiefs were indebted to her because she gave them guns and ammunition on credit and was not a hard creditor. She also had a large number of slaves some of whom could be fielded during war-time.

The exact time when she took the title of Iyalode is uncertain. Some traditions suggest that she was made Iyalode by Basorun Ogunmola who died in 1867, while others seem to indicate that it was Are Onakakanfo Latosa who became the ruler of Ibadan in 1872 who appointed her. Whatever the date of her installation, what is clear is that she was the right person for that period. Ibadan had just launched itself on a career of conquests in the Yoruba country. After defeating and destroying Ijaye, its main rival in 1864, Ibadan succeeded in establishing its overlordship over a large part of the Yoruba country particularly among the Oyo-Yoruba, the Ekiti, the Ijesa and further northeastwards. Such expansion implied physical subjugation and in this the traders had an important role to play as agents for procuring ammunition for warfare from the coast. Efunsetan with her long lasting and extensive connections with Lagos, Porto-Novo and Badagry was therefore a key figure in Ibadan's operations and was eminently suited to fill the post of Iyalode.

The actual installation procedure was not elaborate. The Oluwo her neighbour, who was responsible for various rituals and preparations connected with the installations of chiefs was informed and the necessary

processes were set in motion. On the appointed day, Efunsetan dressed simply but in the most gorgeous and expensive woven cloth — possibly an *etu* — and adorned with costly beads and other jewels went to the *Baale's* house very early in the morning. According to eye witness accounts she was accompanied as still the practice by a large host of people from her compound, four of them riding on horses. In front of her went 12 young unmarried girls, her slaves, who wore only brief skirts but were heavily adorned with the most costly beads. Behind her, her flutist, Apata, who recited her praise names, for all to hear on his flute, followed very closely. Scattered among the teeming crowd were also a large host of drummers and chanters who made her achievements and those of her lineage, the subject of their praise. In the presence of that large crowd, she was installed the second Iyalode in the history of Ibadan in a simple ceremony. The Oluwo placed the Akoko leaves (emblem of Yoruba chieftaincy) on her head and made her swear to seek the interest and welfare of Ibadan and its inhabitants always.

Nor was Efunsetan slow in meeting her pledge. Her policy of granting liberal credits to the warriors continued, but in addition, she now fielded her warriors in war-time. These warriors, who were about one hundred in number, were mainly her slaves, and like other warrior chiefs she supplied them with guns and ammunition, food, clothing, etc. Their leader, Ogidan, stayed for most of the time with Are Latosa who allotted to him his own sphere in the many battles which Ibadan undertook soon after Are Latosa took control of the town. In return for such contribution the fruits of battle soon began to come her way. Unlike the male warriors, she did not have any of the towns which became tributary to Ibadan allotted to her as a kind of private fief, but she was entitled to a share of the tribute that came to Are Latosa as head of Ibadan from such dependent towns.

But even though her military contribution was noteworthy in this war-prone period, her duty as Iyalode embraced much more than that. She was the spokesperson for all women in Ibadan, and has been described as a type of queen, who, like the male head of the town also had her lieutenants. She was consulted when affairs pertaining to women were to be discussed in the meetings of the town chiefs. It was and still is therefore imperative for the Iyalode to sit in council with all the important male chiefs when they hold their regular town meetings to make laws, regulate trade, declare war or just discuss the general welfare of the town. In fact she was not only expected to be present but had to be accompanied by her female lieutenants, Otun Iyalode (second in command), Osi Iyalode (third in command) etc. Efunsetan's opinion carried weight in matters affecting women, in trade matters as a great deal of the trade was handled by women, and in matters regarding the declaration of war and the making of peace as they controlled the supply of ammunition.

But apart from attending meetings in Are Latosa's house, she also held

court in her own compound. Like other Ibadan chiefs she conducted meetings at her Igbejo particularly with her lieutenants. It was also in this place that she settled disputes particularly among the traders. Although she did not have direct jurisdiction over the markets which were supervised by the Iyaloja — mothers of the market — who were often heads of each commodity group, when differences arose among these Iyaloja, they were referred to her Igbejo for settlement.

Her position as a state functionary also placed on her many social responsibilities. She had to take part along with the other chiefs in all the major town festivals. Three of these are most important and still take place every year largely near or during the harvesting period. First is the Oke Badan festival commemorating the titular deity of Ibadan town. Second is the Egungun festival in honour of the ancestors, and third is the festival of Orisa Oko, god of the farms, to mark the harvest. But in addition she had her own personal religious festivals which with her taking of a title became more elaborate. Every year she commemorated her Egba ancestry by her revival in Ibadan of the festival of Alakija, ruler of the destroyed town of Ikija which had by then become one of her farms. But more important was the annual ceremony for the placation and worship of Ori, the divinity that determines a man's destiny and fate. Both were for her important social occasions and gave her an opportunity to demonstrate her extensive social connections. Many of her Egba compatriots in Ibadan, relations from Abeokuta and Ife as well as all the distinguished personalities in Ibadan ranging from the head of the town, Are Latosa, to all his lieutenants would be present to eat, dance and generally rejoice with her. Such occasions indeed provided for her a measure of her popularity in the town and demonstrated to her colleagues her potential influence there.

Clash with Are Latosa

So much success in business and in public life in Ibadan of those days attracted to it great responsibility. It demanded among other things a high sense of leadership. Efunsetan's success and the support which she was able to build up in consequence gave her so much confidence that she began to assert herself within the town assembly of chiefs, and gradually became the spokesperson of a group within it. No other time could have given more opportunity for expressing a standpoint as the period immediately after Are Latosa's assumption of leadership in Ibadan in 1872. Under him, Ibadan's foreign policy seemed to have undergone a change. Latosa surrounded himself with a group of young men like Balogun Ajayi Ogboriefon, his second in command who were still young enough to wish to prove their mettle on the battlefield. They now launched Ibadan on a career of conquest in what appeared to other Yoruba powers as an attempt to subjugate them and establish an Ibadan empire. To them Ibadan appeared to be moving from its earlier position of being the

defender of the Yoruba country against foreign aggression to that of oppressor.

Moreover, the internal political structure of Ibadan too seemed to be undergoing a change. There were strong indications that Latosa was anxious to replace the military oligarchy which had ruled Ibadan from its very foundation by sole rule of himself and members of his family. Traditions indicate that he gave all the most important positions in the town to his sons and personal slaves to the exclusion of others. Such new trends by a young, inexperienced and rather headstrong ruler were bound to provoke criticism; a clash between the young men led by Latosa on the one hand, and the older and independent-minded chiefs on the other was therefore inevitable.

The first crisis developed around the personality of Efunsetan. The causes of the quarrel between Efunsetan and Ààre Latosa have often been differently interpreted. One tradition which has now been reinforced in a Yoruba play claims that Efunsetan was unpopular because she was cruel to her slaves. She was alleged to have refused to allow them to get married and to have brutally killed one of them who became pregnant. Another evidence however gives a contrary impression. Many of the descendants of Efunsetan's slaves are still living in her compound to the present day. Part of the problem was that she was so powerful that no one dared take liberties with her female slaves. Indeed many of them got married to other slaves or contracted marriages with free men outside Efunsetan's compound on the payment of the usual redemption price. There is also strong evidence in the traditions of her humane treatment of these slaves. For instance she developed great attachment to one of her slaves whom she nicknamed Bobore (i.e. if you have a real friend she is worth more than a host of relations). Another slave, was after her death still well enough to go back to his home in Ilesa and rise to become the ruler, Owa Ataiyero. Indeed the devotion with which they furthered her trading interest is an indication of the humane manner in which she treated them.

The actual cause of the rift was that Efunsetan was too independent-minded and too outspoken in her criticism. She also made her opposition obvious. For instance, after the Ado war of 1872 when Ogidan, her slave had led 100 of her slaves to battle under Are Latosa, she gradually got disenchanted with the idea of continuous warfare, particularly as the warriors, especially Are Latosa and Balogun Ajayi Ogboriefon, stretched increasingly her credit facilities and failed to pay their debts. When Are Latosa launched another expedition in 1874, she therefore refused to field any soldiers, to give ammunition on credit and to declare her solidarity with him by meeting him along with the other chiefs at the gate to the town as was her wont. Thereafter it was an open declaration of hostility between her and Are Latosa. The latter succeeded in getting the town chiefs, some of whom were heavily indebted to Efunsetan, to agree to her deposition. She was accordingly relieved of her title of Iyalode, and

her immediate subordinate, Subuola, the Otun Iyalode, another wealthy trader, was installed in her stead. In Ibadan, such deprivation of title was a public declaration not only of the council of chiefs' disapproval, but that of the whole town which they represented. Such disapproval was expressed in many ways. For instance, in the case of Efunsetan, she was ostracized by the whole town. She was no longer allowed any visitors; traders, drummers, friends etc. were forbidden to do any business with her compound. In the circumstances, continued residence in the town was impossible and the custom in the nineteenth century was for such a chief to commit suicide or go into exile. In either event a great part of her property would be looted by the populace.

Efunsetan, however, did not give in so easily; for in spite of the odds against her, her position was not a hopeless one. She provided a rallying point for those who did not approve of Are Latosa's policy but were too timid to say so. Moreover, she was not without powerful connections outside Ibadan. In this regard, her Egba ancestry was an asset; indeed her kinsmen were in the ascendant at Abeokuta. Her cousin, Ogundipe had become the Alatise (Mediator General) in the late 1860s in Abeokuta. She must also have built for herself in that town powerful support through her activities. Any action against her could therefore be easily construed as an anti-Egba trend in Ibadan's policy. Efunsetan therefore refused to commit suicide or go into exile. Instead, she tried to placate some of the neutral chiefs by stating her own standpoint and bribing them with costly presents. She was consequently summoned to a town meeting at which she pleaded for forgiveness for whatever mistakes she had made.

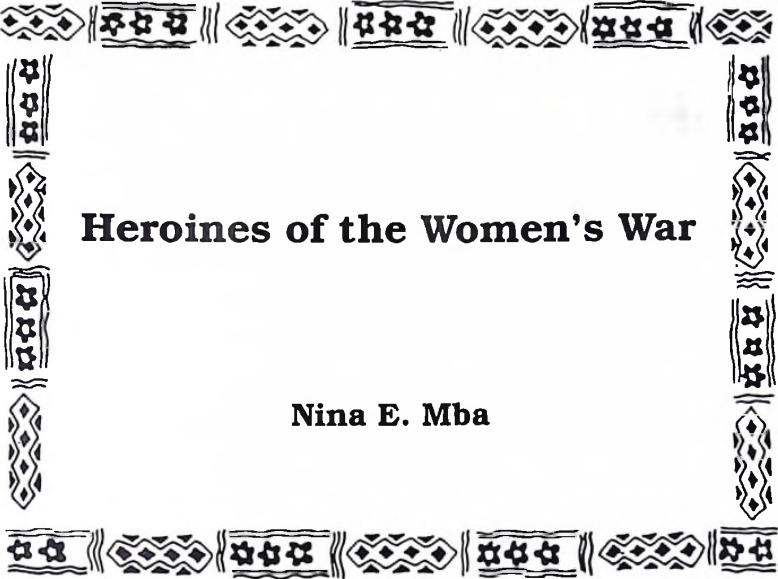
The Latosa faction was, however, unwilling to allow the continued influence of such a powerful woman. They were also afraid that her continued presence in Ibadan would be construed as an indication of their own weak position and might lead to a loss of face. In spite of her apologies, therefore they continued to plot for her destruction. They succeeded in getting one of her relatives, Kumuyilo, who hoped to inherit her property to their side. The end was therefore not long in coming. Egungun Gbajero, the masquerade charged with the responsibility of killing women offenders, was heard to utter its shrill cry of warning of its intent to kill in the middle of the night. The following day, Efunsetan was crushed to death with one of her imported Portuguese casks as she slept.

The death of Efunsetan shocked most of the people of Ibadan. Her Christian friends, led by her compatriot, Daniel Olubi, the Egba missionary, were the first to express their sympathy. They had a coffin made and it was in this coffin that she was buried in her compound. Others, however, did not adopt such a peaceful approach. The Egba in Abeokuta sent a strong message to Ibadan to remonstrate against the killing of Efunsetan whom they still regarded as their compatriot. Some of the Ibadan chiefs also publicly accused Latosa of plotting Efunsetan's death, and indeed at that meeting, Kumuyilo, named Are Latosa and Balogun

Ajayi Ogboriefon as his accomplices. Civil war was only averted when the latter protested their innocence and those who actually perpetrated the deed were brought to book. Kumuyilo was driven away from Efunsetan's compound and the three slaves who actually committed the crime were punished. Two of them were killed in the market at Oja Oba, while the third one was sent to the Alaafin of Oyo, who was Ibadan's overlord, for whatever punishment he thought fit.

Conclusion

The career of Efunsetan thus ended in tragedy but her fame and achievements remain till today to remind us of the contributions of one woman to the growth of Ibadan. There are many concrete evidences bearing witness of her greatness. The compound which she inherited from her kinsmen, Oluyole, is still known as Iyalode's compound, and the deserted Egba settlement at Orile Ikija which she turned into a farm village is still referred to as Aba Iyalode, or Iyalode's settlement. Such recognition is appropriate. For like the immigrant warriors of nineteenth century Ibadan, she saw the town as a land of opportunities, settled there and made a name for herself. Her path to success in Ibadan was through hard work in the world of trade. She realised the needs of that period for the interchange of goods between the different parts of the Yoruba country, and gradually established a commercial empire which covered a large part of that country. Without any knowledge of reading and writing she managed a successful commercial empire and in Ibadan of her time accumulated the type of property which only the most distinguished could command. In her, Ibadan therefore produced one of that tribe of distinguished women traders like Madam Tinubu of Lagos and Abeokuta and Kakawa of Lagos, the ancestors of the modern market women, whose business acumen has given them undisputed influence not only in the world of commerce but also in the political and social life of the country.



Heroines of the Women's War

Nina E. Mba

“The comparison between women and fruit-bearing trees lies at the root of certain aspects of indigenous social and ethical philosophy. Firstly just as one cannot, in the interest of human beings joke with the survival of fruit-bearing trees, one could not play with the fate of women.”

The preceding chapters have focused on individual women, who through a combination of the force of their own personalities and the prevailing circumstances of their time were able to play significant roles in Nigerian history. This book on women in Nigerian history would however not be complete without a chapter on the historical phenomenon which was brought about exclusively by women; this event was known by the colonial administration as the 'Aba riots' but the women themselves called it the *Women's War*. It was a movement which affected the whole course of Southern Nigerian colonial history.

Unlike the themes in the previous chapters, this one is not about one woman but a large group of women. In this respect, the *Women's War* is a unique mass movement in Nigerian history; it was not led by one or even a few leaders. It was characterised rather by what may be termed collective leadership. This phenomenon was a natural development from the traditional, social and political system of the Igbo and Ibibio peoples in the areas covered by the uprising i.e. Calabar and Owerri provinces. A brief examination of that system and the women's position within it is therefore necessary for an understanding of this significant episode in Nigerian history.

Pre-Colonial Society

Among the Igbo and Ibibio, the village was the basic political unit. Political authority was diffused among the heads of the lineages and was exercised in a democratic and an informal way. There was sex differentiation in political roles and no female could be the head of a household or of a lineage or sub-lineage.

In this patrilineal society, village exogamy was the norm; the wives of a village therefore came from some distance away and even when they had children, remained essentially outsiders. Since the wife's ties with her own descent group were not severed and she went home regularly, links were maintained between different areas. These links made possible inter-village group trade by both men and women and enabled women to play the role of peace makers in disputes between their natal and marital homes. The wife was not incorporated into her husband's lineage but regarded primarily as a member of her own patrilineage; she did have right of usufruct and rights to residence and protection. She could not inherit from her husband's descent group and if she had no children, she

did not even have rights of usufruct after the death of the husband. The distance from the natal home and the lesser degree of economic independence meant that divorce was not common. Judicial matters were settled by the sub-lineage, lineage or village council depending on the seriousness of the offence. Women therefore were not involved in the judicial process except in disputes between and among women which were settled only by the women's associations.

There were two types of women's organisations; the associations of the wives of the village (and village group in some places), and the women's little societies.

In keeping with the democratic nature of Igbo/Ibibio government, leadership in the organisation was informal; a spokeswoman was usually nominated by consensus but she saw herself only as representing, not leading the women. The spokeswoman was often selected for her wisdom and rhetorical skills, not on the criterion of age or wealth, although wealth was often a sign of enterprise and intelligence, and elderly women did exercise moral authority. Each village had its own society which was self-contained and had no formal affiliation with other villages in the same village group or other groups; there were however informal ties of kinship and trade.

Despite their loose, informal and self-contained structure, the village wives' associations provided a very effective, clear-cut and authoritative organisation in which all the wives were involved. There was no question of a woman's right not to belong to or to disobey a communal decision of the association; if she did, she would be visited with all the sanctions at the command of the association, such as ridicule, ostracism, corporal punishment, destruction of property and the invoking of the god, *Ala*, to punish the dissident. Apart from acting as the judicial body for disputes between women which did not involve men, the association also intervened in marital disputes. It could mobilise effectively against a defaulting husband through ridicule and the process of 'sitting on a man', whereby the women sat outside the man's compound singing abusive songs and refusing to leave until he agreed to their demands. Besides sanctions directed at individual men and women, the association could also apply collective sanctions against the male community, such as threatening to leave the village en masse, refusing to cook, or refusal of intercourse. Though these collective sanctions were not often mobilised and were generally directed against particular individuals, it is believed by all observers that the men took the potential threat seriously.

In addition to the functions already outlined, the associations were largely concerned with affairs which concerned women primarily, such as the carrying out of ritual purification, the fixing of a date for the planting of women's crops and the protection of their crops from theft or damage. Their role in food production and agriculture was therefore important. Among the hinterland Igbos/Ibibios, the men farmed only yam; the women helped in the harvesting of yam but planted their own

crops such as coco-yam, vegetables and cassava. The yam held more prestige but the women's crops were more important. The women were responsible for feeding their families not only during the planting season of the yam (April to August) but throughout the rest of the year; for even when the yams were harvested, the soup was prepared with ingredients from the women's crops. Besides producing the food, women also prepared it and this gave the women the potential weapon of refusing to cook for the men.

Most of Igbo and Ibibio land constituted what is now known as the 'palm belt' area. Until the trade with Europe in palm produce developed in the early 19th century, the production of palm oil was carried out entirely by women and was used principally for immediate household consumption. The women were free to pick palm fruits wherever they found them. However, once palm produce became a major export, it came to be regarded as a man's product since it could now be exchanged for men's goods, such as guns and spirits. The ownership of palm trees was vested in the male land owners and the harvesting was strictly regulated. The women still largely carried out the actual extraction of the oil and sold the oil in local markets, but the men took over the long distance and external trade in palm oil. However, in most areas, the women retained the palm kernels which were used for household consumption and in local trading.

That was the system as it operated in the pre-colonial period. What were the main changes effected by colonialism?

The Warrant Chief System

The new system of administration introduced by the British colonial masters was known as the Warrant Chief system. Professor Afigbo has described in detail this form of government in his book, *The Warrant Chiefs: Indirect Rule in South Eastern Nigeria 1891-1929*. Men who made themselves conspicuous to the administration such as interpreters, messengers, police and army recruits and traders, were given warrants to act as the representatives of the administration in their areas and they exercised powers which were unprecedented in the traditional system. Nor was their choice made in consultation with the men of the village and in most cases, the Warrant Chiefs abused their authority. They exacted money and goods from the people, victimised their critics in the native courts and exploited women who came to the courts, especially when seeking divorce.

The position of women within this administration was a peculiar one. They were, to a large extent, an invisible factor within it; they responded much later to education and in the area covered by the Women's War, they were not wealthy. Although women were thus virtually excluded from the administration yet they came under its surveillance. The colonial courts interfered with women's traditional judicial responsibilities. Just

as the secret societies were forbidden to take punitive action, so women were not allowed by law to 'sit on' anyone or to discipline offending members of their associations. The economic position of women was also affected by colonialism. The introduction of cassava, of coinage currency, and the expanded market for palm produce had resulted in many more women, especially in Onitsha, Oguta, Azumiri, Opobo and Mbawsi, being involved as middlewomen in the palm oil and kernel trade with the foreign companies. They then purchased imported goods such as cloth, tobacco, cigarettes and spirits and took them back to the villages to sell. This trade had meant a higher standard of living for women who were consequently hard hit by the drop in prices due to the world depression which they could not understand. Furthermore, unlike the men, their economic alternatives were severely restricted. Apart from the drop in prices, there were other changes in the produce trade which affected women; for instance, as from 1928, produce inspection was introduced and the women regarded this move as interference in their trade.

Another crucial issue was that of taxation. Taxation was introduced into the Eastern provinces in 1927, at a time of economic instability. By 1929, the women had begun to feel the pinch of this new measure because of the interdependent nature of the village economy. Many women were having to pay tax for their husbands, sons and male relations. It was however the belief that women were to be taxed which transformed the various isolated anti-taxation protests by men and women into a massive far-reaching protest movement by women.

The people had strong moral and psychological objections to the taxation of women. Since women, as child bearers, were responsible for the continued existence of the society, a threat to their welfare was a threat to the future of the society. Furthermore the idea of the counting of human beings was regarded as abhorrent and an insult to the God who created man. One of the women who testified before the commission of enquiry, Enyidia of Oloko, demanded:

"What have we women done to warrant our being taxed? We women are like trees which bear fruit. You should tell us the reason why we who bear seeds should be counted."

Afigbo commenting on this statement pointed out that:

"The comparison between women and fruit-bearing trees lies at the root of certain aspects of indigenous social and ethical philosophy. Firstly just as one cannot, in the interest of human beings joke with the survival of fruit-bearing trees, one could not play with the fate of women."

The War

It was a series of administrative blunders which led the women of Oloko, Bende division, Owerri province, to believe that women were to be taxed.

During the 1926 assessment, the people in Oloko and Ayaba had been told that the counting was simply part of a census and had nothing to do with taxation. Then taxation was introduced in 1928. In October, 1929, an Assistant District Officer, on his own initiative set about a fresh count of men, their wives and livestock. For the people, the obvious conclusion was that this new exercise was a prelude to the taxation of women and they were strengthened and buttressed in this belief by the actions of the Warrant Chiefs in the area who had misunderstood their instructions and also believed that women were to be taxed. For instance, the Warrant Chief in Oloko, Okugo, who had already made himself very unpopular by his corruption and abuse of office, was ordered by the Assistant District Officer to produce the census figures. Knowing how unpopular the counting would be, Okugo sent a mission school teacher, Mark Emeruwa, to do the counting.

The trouble started when Emeruwa came to count the wives and livestock in the compound of Ojim, in Oloko. One of the wives, Nwanyeruwa, protested bitterly:

"Are you still counting ... last year my son's wife who was pregnant died? What am I to count? I have been mourning the death of that woman!"

Afigbo has pointed out that in all probability she saw a connection between the first count and the death of her son's wife. The argument led to a physical fight between Nwanyeruwa and Emeruwa, after which Nwanyeruwa ran to inform other women who were holding a previously scheduled meeting to discuss the rumours about the taxation of women. The women saw the incident as conclusive proof of the intention to tax them. They proceeded at once to 'sit on' Emeruwa and Okugo and sent messengers with palm leaves to neighbouring villages, which in turn sent on the message to other villages. Women from Ayaba, Umuahia, Owerinta, Nguru and even Ikot Ekpene came to Oloko on the 25th of November and joined the Oloko women in besieging Okugo's compound. Eventually, on the 22nd of December, the District Officer gave the women Okugo's cap of office and on the 4th of December 1929, Okugo was convicted in the court at Bende..

Encouraged by their success at Oloko, the women went back to their own areas and held mass meetings and demonstrations. Thus began the Women's War (Ogu Umunwanye) which covered a large part of South Eastern Nigeria. The movement spread throughout large areas of Owerri Province including Ahoada division and into Opobo. Aba and Ikot Ekpene areas of Calabar Province. By the end of December, 1929, when troops restored order, ten native courts had been destroyed, many others damaged, houses of native court personnel attacked, factories at Imo River, Aba, Mbawsi, Anaba looted and 55 women killed.

It is a testimony to the courage and commitment of the women that during this 'War' when women were fired upon, they were in no way

frightened or intimidated, and continued their agitation. Active agitation continued and did not stop until July 1930. For up till that time, none of the women's objectives appeared to have been achieved: the tax on men remained; women were as yet not convinced they were not going to be taxed; the courts were still to be re-organised and produce prices had not risen. With the ending of the work of all the Commissions of enquiry and the publication of the reports in July the agitation died down. It then became clear that the taxation of men was not going to stop, but that there would be no taxation of women. The courts were also going to be re-organised along the lines recommended by the women, and Warrant Chiefs would be prosecuted.

To understand the thinking and objectives of the women it is best to examine the statements actually made by the women themselves to the District Officers at the time of the war. Fortunately most of these were recorded; they are to be found in the reports of the numerous Collective Punishment Inquiries held in January, 1930; in the records of the Birrell-Gray Commission of Inquiry held in the same month; in the various petitions written for the women which are enclosed in the district papers in the Enugu archives; in the A.C.I.R. and Notes of Evidences; in addition there are eye-witness accounts by those women who took part in the Women's War and who are still alive today.

The Actresses

The question of how representative the leaders who gave evidence were, requires some analysis before proceeding to examine the content of what they said. Although it was Nwanyeruwa who actually triggered off the war, she did not play any significant role thereafter. The Report was correct when it observed:

"Though Nwanyeruwa became and still remains a name to conjure with, we doubt, from our observation of her personality and from the evidence that she was herself the moving spirit ... more probably she was the tool of the *intelligent trio* of Oloko women: Ikonnia, Nwannedie and Nwugo, who cleverly used her as the symbol of womanhood rising up against oppression."

Who was this Nwanyeruwa? The Notes of Evidences provide very little information about her and the Oloko leaders, though that is in fact twice as much as is provided for women from other areas. At least at the Umudike hearings, some of the women were asked whether they were Christians, the number of their children and where they were living. From the notes of evidence we learn that Nwanyeruwa was elderly, had one child, a son, whose wife had died in 1928 and that she was not a Christian. From field work I ascertained that Nwanyeruwa was in fact an elderly non-Christian native nurse, that is, she did circumcisions and that in fact it was after the circumcision of the baby son of Madam Ejighato Ukattah that she was told about the rumours of women paying

tax. She is remembered as a spirited outspoken woman and this is shown, not in the Note of Evidences but in the report of the Collective Punishment Inquiry; women representatives from other areas gave evidence that they went to Oloko and gave her the equivalent of ₦1.00 from each village to

"... thank her preventing women paying tax. She warned us not to loot but advised us to go for the Chiefs' caps."

Nwanyeruwa then cross-examined the witnesses and denied that she had told them to take the caps. She was fined the equivalent of ₦1.00 for contempt of court because she abused one Inspector of Police in an undertone!

The women begged that Nwanyeruwa should give them a piece of paper to show that they had been to see her and to prove that Oloko was not paying tax. The letter was written in Igbo (author unknown) and read:

"Nwanyeruwa of Oloko proper said that the D.O. said women will not pay tax till the world ends—that Chiefs were not to exist any more and that was the voice of all the women."

A record was kept by a man from Oloko of the amount of money donated and the money was used to entertain the delegates of the villages who came to Oloko and for the travel expenses of the Oloko women who went to Port Harcourt, Mbawsi and Umuahia. The Report stressed that there was no sign that Nwanyeruwa personally profited from the money.

The "trio of intelligent Oloko women" referred to earlier in the Report, were selected by the Oloko women to be their spokes-women because of their strong personalities and ability to speak well. Before this time, they were not regarded as leaders especially as they were not elderly like Nwanyeruwa; and they were simply deputed to be leaders for "this particular occasion". All three were Christians but illiterate and like all other Oloko women, engaged in farming and petty trade. The effectiveness of the leadership of these three women is amply testified to by the various District Officers. According to the Report, they prevented their own court from being destroyed, travelled to Umuahia, managed to persuade the women converging on Umuahia to return to their homes and sent a telegram to the women at Aba calling on them to stop looting. This was the extent of their control; however, they had no authority in other areas. Each village group had its own leaders and there was little co-ordination except as far as sending messages. Once the message was received, each representative leadership took over.

From the evidence available, it seems that the pattern of leadership in other Igbo areas was similar to that at Oloko, that is, there were a few women in each village group who were selected to be the spokeswomen for the occasion on the basis of their personal leadership qualities. They were usually not elderly but middle-aged women who had finished having children but who were not necessarily leaders before 1929. Some were Christians but were mostly illiterate; from the Collective Punishment

Inquiries and Notes of Evidence, it is, however, obvious that they were women of keen wit and intelligence who were not in the least intimidated by the commissions of inquiry. A few more examples will illustrate these points.

"At Nguru there were two prominent leaders, Mary Onumaere and Chinna. Mary Onumaere was a Christian, a farmer, who was selected as a leader because, according to my informants, the women "would see her heart and knew she could lead. She had a very bold appearance and a manly voice". She led the 3,000 women trying to enter Owerri town on the 14th December and impressed an eye witness as a very courageous, strong leader. Chinna, when asked if she was a leader replied: "We have no special leaders. If any woman had anything to say in connection with the disturbances she came forward and said it."

This was no doubt true but at the same time Chinna showed herself to be a leader on the spot. The disturbances in Nguru continued till the end of January, 1930, and the District Officer was confronted with a mass demonstration of hundreds of women. He thought Chinna looked sensible and:

"I called on her to get rid of the women and to take them to the market place and come back with 20 representatives. She agreed and got the women away."

Perhaps it was because she so impressed the District Officer that in 1930 Chinna was appointed the one female member out of a native court (Nguru) of 13 members.

At Azumini the Collective Punishment Inquiry held the Igbo women responsible for inciting the riot in Opobo, for burning the Azumini Native Court and claimed they had also gone to join the looting in Aba. At the Commission of Inquiry, the Azumini Community hired a lawyer to defend them and the women's spokeswoman, Rosanah Ogwe, argued that the court had been burnt by the Ibibio and Bonny women in Azumini and not by the Igbo women. She also denied that the Azumini women went to Opobo or Aba and pointed out that in fact there is another village called Azumini. From my discussions with women in Azumini, it appears that in fact the Igbo Azumini women were preparing to go to Aba but that Ogwe stopped them on the road and persuaded them to turn back, promising them that she would get assurances from their chiefs that women would not pay tax. Ogwe was, like most Azumini women, a trader and a Christian. She said of herself "I was not the head amongst the women of Azumini but I was elected to be their spokeswoman."

None of the women mentioned above was ever imprisoned but one of the leaders of the women in Obohia (near Azumini), Nnete Nma, was sentenced to two years imprisonment. According to Chief Charles O. Nwagbara, Nnete had called a meeting of the women and told them that they must never pay tax and urged them to fight. Under her leadership

the women burnt the Obohia court. A court messenger reported Nnete to the District Officer. Apparently, she was a young woman at the time, a trader in tobacco, while her husband was a farmer.

Some of the active women were the wives and daughters of Warrant Chiefs and court personnel. In most cases such female relatives at least identified with the women's movement. Some were even leaders; for example, Edure, daughter of Nda, court member of Ebuwa Native Court led the Etchi women of Ebuwa to destroy a court member's house at Umu-Nwa. At Utime Etim Ekpo, one of the wives of Chief Akpan Umo was the woman who beat the drum to summon a meeting of women and was in fact one of the women killed at Utime Etim Ekpo. Ada of Ihitte, who gave evidence at the Commission of Inquiry, was the wife of a head court messenger. Nwata of Okpuala who was related to three chiefs, gave evidence against them.

Among the Ibibio and Ogoni women it seems that their leaders during the crisis were their existing 'head women' rather than women selected during the crisis. From the evidence of the leaders at Abak, Opobo and Ikot Ekpene, it appears that they were already head women. At the inquiry, Abigail Ogolu of Opobo explained "The D.O. (District Officer) sent for me as I am head woman to tell women no tax". She later tried to stop the women converging at the Opobo waterside and was then accused by the women of accepting a bribe from the D.O. to stop them. At the Commission of Inquiry Ogolu was accused by one of the male witnesses of bringing palm leaves from Ogoni to warn Opobo women.

Objectives

The roles of these women were largely to be the spokeswomen since the discipline and solidarity of the women was already ensured by the framework of the existing women's associations. As spokeswomen they voiced the grievances and objections of the women. The universal objection was against taxation for women; it was this consciousness of all women being victimised by taxation which served to unite the women. Indeed, as Afigbo points out, one of the reasons why the women in Onitsha and most of Ogoja Province did not join was because they were first told it was a local issue of a particular chief asking women to pay tax. By the time they realised that the real cause was the rumour that the Warrant Chiefs and the government were planning to tax all women, the government's use of force served to discourage them. However, besides the issue of the taxation of women there was also widespread objection to the taxation of men, which after all also affected the women. Their objections to male taxation, from all available evidence, were based purely on economic grounds, not the political and cultural objections which were raised against the taxation of women.

The next most widespread objection was against the Warrant Chiefs. The women were most vehement in their opposition not only to the

Warrant Chiefs themselves, but to the very system of having imposed unnatural chiefs. They objected to the system which denied their natural, traditional rulers their place. In many cases the women said they would show the Commission who the real leaders were — meaning, the traditional leaders, the *Ezeala*. At the same time they were in favour of having the new chiefs elected for a specific period of time rather than for life; a term of three years was frequently indicated as suitable. As one witness, Ogotu of Ahiara put it:

"Even women are taken as wives on probation in order to test them. If they prove satisfactory during the probation period they are retained as wives. If not they are sent away. We want a similar principle based in connection with the appointment of the chiefs of the court."

The women did not however demand that they should be made chiefs, though some such as Nwanyiezi of Ikafem, Akulechula and Ahudi of Nsidimo, demanded that women should have a say in selecting the chiefs: for example, the latter stated:

"If a new man is appointed then all the women should be present and all the men should be present and both should approve his appointment."

The petition from the women of the 27 towns of Nguru Native Court said:

"We beg to recommend the cancellation of the Warrants of those whom their caps have been forfeited by we and order an appointment of new members for a session of two years intervention ... those who can be chosen by we."

What the women were asking for was the right to be consulted in the selection of chiefs but not that they themselves be made chiefs.

There was a widespread belief among them that the decision to tax women came not from the government but from the Warrant Chiefs. Even today the women whom I spoke to, who had taken part in the women's war believe that it was the chiefs, not the government, who proposed to tax them.

In their testimonies they drew a very sharp distinction between the Warrant Chiefs and the "white man's government". While the Reports saw the riots as a move against all constituted authority the women were at great pains to point out that they were not at war with the government. For example, Ogbodia of Oloko declared during the Commission of Inquiry:

"We only know about Okugo's case and the white man, otherwise the government is on our side. We have no dispute with government."

Another witness, Nwanyieke of Ahiara said:

"We did not come to fight but simply to tell government that the chiefs have been oppressing us."

Their insistence on the distinction between the colonial government and the Warrant Chiefs does not necessarily mean that they did not comprehend the fact that the Warrant Chiefs were the creation of the colonial government and its means of governing. The manifest intelligence of the women would suggest rather that this approach was a strategy employed by them to please the government. Their movement to get rid of taxation and Warrant Chiefs had been arrested by the power of government; only the government could then achieve the same ends for the women. If the government believed that the women were not hostile to it but only to their own people, then government would have been more inclined to favour the women and remove the agents. But there were no demands for the abolition of courts which had in fact made it easier for women to gain divorces; there were no complaints about bride price being too high or about women violating customs. Far from being an anti-Christian movement many of the leaders were Christians and no mission was ever attacked.

Nor were the women fighting against the white men, and in fact, their behaviour during the war bears this out. The only occasion on which whites were assaulted (and no white person was killed) was in Aba after Dr. Hunter had knocked down and killed two women. In other areas, indeed the women even protected the white officers; for example at Umuaturu, the District Officer reported:

"One woman who appeared to have considerable influence and always used it for good actually set a guard of women on my house and they remained until the end. She told me that as I was a stranger she did not consider it right that I should suffer."

What was the role of the men during the disturbances? Despite the attempts by nearly every administrative officer to find evidence of "male conspiracy" in the background, there is no evidence of men taking part in any significant way. The only exception is in Ukam in Calabar Province, where an unauthorised assessment had been carried out on the 1st of December, in which houses rather than wives and livestock had been counted. This made the men believe that an increase in their taxation was imminent and they therefore resisted. Otherwise the contribution of the men took the form of passive support for their women in the hope that their actions would lead to the abolition or reduction of their own tax. The men did not rebel on a large scale against taxation in 1928 because they had already experienced the power of the colonial forces during the "pacification". Women on the other hand had not been affected then and there was the widespread belief that the troops would not shoot at women.

Furthermore, many of the women believed that they were protected against bullets by certain rituals and medicines. They were brutally disillusioned especially on December 16th, 1929, at Opobo, when the District Officer, panic stricken by a large band of demonstrating women

jostling around him, gave orders to the soldiers to shoot. In a few minutes twenty women lay dead, with more wounded.

Finally it should be recalled that the men did not have the same kind of network of associations and sex solidarity as the women which enabled the latter to mobilise across boundaries into a united body. When it seemed as though women were to be taxed it was in the Igbo/Ibibio tradition of sex segregation that women should look after their own interests without the intervention of the men. Besides, women had lost more than the men who were the Warrant Chiefs and court personnel. Therefore the ranks of the men were divided, whereas the women had no stake in the preservation of the Warrant Chiefs system.

On the contrary, it seems to this writer that the Women's War was primarily a movement of women to protect their economic and political interests which were endangered by taxation, the economic crisis and the Warrant Chiefs. They asserted their rights as women vis-a-vis the men. The women's dresses, body gestures and songs constantly drew attention to their sexual identity. They carried and adorned themselves with palm leaves and branches, which in some areas meant peace, in others, war or mourning but which also expressed that affinity with the fruitful land. On many occasions during the disturbances individual women refused to identify themselves except as '*oha nd'inyom*' in acknowledgement of the sex solidarity which united Ibo, Ibibio, Annang and Ogoni women. The Nguru leader, Mary Onumaere stated:

"We have not been treated well. We wish to be treated just as Europeans treat their women in their country. We don't want to be oppressed by our menfolk."

This belief that European women were better off than they were is repeated several times; for instance, Olenga of Umuakpora:

"In your own country your women dictate to you, but we women in this country should we not dictate?"

The Report drew a comparison between *Oha nd'inyom* and the women's suffrage movement in England,

"...where militant feminism committed breaches of the law with a view to drawing the widest attention to what they believed to be the inherent justice of their cause."

There is some relevance to the comparison in that the women did say often:

"We sang so that you might ask us what our grievances were. We had cause for grievances before taxation was introduced."

They did not want the white men to leave because they recognised that their interests had been served by colonialism, as they understood it. The changes in their economic activities discussed above and their increased legal rights under the native courts, in spite of the abuses of the chiefs,

were to the advantage of women. Therefore the women did not demand the removal of the courts but the return to the system of administrative officers presiding. It was not in their interest to call for a return to the old order except as far as a return to the natural leaders was concerned. Then the women would be consulted as they had been in the past. A petition from a woman, Wanyiriwa demanded:

"... white man in every Native Court because our black men are too badly."

Another witness, Ejiaatu explained:

"Why we ask that our cases be heard by white men is that we have been oppressed a great deal as regards court cases."

Achievements

What did the women actually achieve by their war? They were assured that no taxation of women had ever been intended and they ensured that taxation in the Eastern Region was not introduced for many years (not till the 1950's). They forced the colonial administration to recognise that many of the Warrant Chiefs were corrupt and despotic. Indeed in the aftermath of the Women's War, the women themselves brought forward cases of alleged corruption against Warrant Chiefs, which were tried by District Officers in each area. The women hired lawyers and letter-writers to assist them. In Aba division there were ten prosecutions and five convictions; in Okigwe division; there was one conviction.

After the report of the Commission of Inquiry was published, the British Government criticised the Nigerian administration's taxation policy in the Eastern provinces and demanded the abandonment of the Warrant Chief system. Instead, recognition was given to the traditional leaders (*Ezeala*), the selection of whom was done by the community including representatives of the women. The native courts were completely re-organised and a few women were made members of several courts. A number of other administrative reforms were introduced.

In conclusion, it can be seen that the women succeeded in their objectives and in so doing brought about far-reaching changes in the colonial administration.

Finally, it is important to note that the Women's War did not mark the end of organised mass protest by women. They remained vitally concerned with matters which affected their interests such as the level of taxation on men, economic encroachments by government, conduct of the native courts and the price of produce. Though the Women's War marked an historical divide for the colonial administration, it was not so much a watershed for the women. It was the most massive and effective of their movements but it did not and could not provide permanent solutions to the problems of social and economic changes induced by colonialism, which affected women. Throughout the 1930's, 1940's and

1950's there were a number of other mass movements by women's associations.

Information on the women's war was obtained from the Aba Commission of Inquiry, and the Notes of Evidence, available in the Nigerian Archives, and from interviews with women in the areas affected. Other authoritative analyses of the women's war are to be found in the writings of Professor A.E. Afigbo, especially in his book, *The Warrant Chiefs: Indirect Rule in Southern Eastern Nigeria 1891-1929*, London, Longmans, 1972.

Omu Okwei of Osomari

Felicia Ifeoma Ekejiuba



Okwei is more fondly remembered as Omu, which means queen, both at Osomari where she was born and at Onitsha where she achieved fame. This indicates the extent of her success, strength of character and popularity. We will appreciate her achievements better if we bear in mind the times in which she lived.

Throughout Okwei's life, from about 1872 to 1943, the style of life, values, leadership and economic structures of Nigerian peoples, underwent radical changes. For example, trade in slaves which, during the first part of her life of seventy years had been very important, both inside and outside Nigeria, was abolished. The emphasis in trade instead shifted to palm oil, alcoholic drinks, tobacco, textiles and other imported manufactured goods.

People walked great distances or travelled on waterways by canoe. These factors naturally affected the nature and volume of trade. It meant for instance, that groups who lived along navigable waterways had a great advantage in trade. They could transport heavier loads in their canoes than others could carry on their heads. Profitable trade often involved long distances. Since many Nigerian groups compete for the profits of trade, they were periodically involved in conflicts. People who traded far away from home, as a result, had to be protected by warriors. Canoes therefore had to be fitted out with fighting men and weapons of war. Only very rich and powerful traders could own such canoes. As a result, wealth and greatness were also measured by the number of canoes and fighting men one had.

It is clear that given these avenues, men were better suited to attain social and political heights than women. Indeed, women were valued mostly as wives and bearers of children. However, although women depended on men politically and ritually, they were expected to be economically self-sufficient. While men were away on long distance trading ventures, women traded locally or worked on farms to provide food. Women were useful to men in other ways. By giving daughters away in marriage, fathers could make friends and allies in distant lands. Traders, chiefs and warriors in particular, as a result, married many wives and looked forward to giving their daughters away in marriage to powerful chiefs in distant lands. Such arrangements facilitated their trade and military relations.

By the time Okwei became an adult woman, these practices were slowly changing. European traders were moving in from the coast, where they

had been confined for centuries, to the inland ports along the River Niger. They were opening up shops, all over the ports of trade on the River Niger where they would retail imported manufactured goods and procure palm oil and kernel for export overseas. Palm oil and kernels were in great demand in many overseas countries that Europeans did everything within their power to get as much profit out of it as possible. They stopped the constant fighting between the Nigerian trading groups. They competed with Nigerian trading groups and established traders, such as the Brass and other Delta groups, who were there before them.

Europeans preferred to have Nigerians work for them as junior partners. It was thus in their interest to give Nigerians just enough education to enable them work as clerks, interpreters, shopkeepers and policemen. Between 1900 and 1920, British rule was established in Ibo land. The British introduced schools and churches to help them achieve their purpose of altering traditional Nigerian ways of life and getting the people to adopt the British way of life. British money, the Pound Sterling, gradually replaced the cowry shells and manillas which many Nigerian communities had been using.

These and many others were far reaching changes which altered the values, goals and style of life of Nigerians. The period of transition from the traditional ways of life to British rule was a difficult one. Many Nigerians did not understand some of the innovations. Many undoubtedly were satisfied with the status quo and did not want the changes. A few, like Omu Okwei, had the foresight to accept some of the changes that were useful while respecting and upholding age-long institutions. It required an unusual sense of perception and courage to transcend the problems of the transitional period, to perceive the potentialities of the new era exploit them and achieve fame. It is even more remarkable that some of the innovators of this period were women. They had to cope with additional prejudices and obstacles which societies, traditional and modern, place in the way of women who pioneered the incursions into domains traditionally regarded as the preserve of men.

Osomari, where Omu Okwei was born, is a small town on the lower reaches of the River Niger. Before roads and railways were built, Osomari was an important port of trade. It competed with other riverine ports such as Abo, Onitsha, Asaba, Aguleri, Idah and Lokoja for the trade that passed along the river from the Nigerian coast to its hinterland. Osomari was related to Idah in another way. Its traditions and some of its institutions show that its people originally migrated from Igala in or about the sixteenth century. Idah is the major port of the Igala people. So, Idah and Osomari had kinship in addition to trade relations. Igala was also an important trade language. Many people in Osomari thus spoke both Ibo and Igala. Many people also took wives from Igala to facilitate trade and social relations.

Such were the conditions during which Omu Okwei lived for the most part of her life. It is easy for us to appreciate why Okwei did not keep

much written records that would have helped us to write a more detailed account of her fascinating life. She did not go to school. Fortunately her sons, grandsons, their wives and relatives were able to give an eye witness, account of some facets of her life and trade. Her nephew, Robert Olisa, who is the present Atamanya (King) of Osomari, had a more detailed first hand account of her life than anybody else. His account has made it possible for this writer to reconstruct Okwei's biography. It was also possible for her to supplement his accounts with information and impressions which emerged from the few letters written to Omu by her customers, admirers, enemies and clients. Her scanty land and trade papers as well as records of her court cases against her debtors, her slaves and those groups who pawned their land to her to pay off their debts have also provided valuable sources of information.

Early Life

Okwei was born well. Her parents and grandparents were, by the standards of the time, men of wealth and fame, by birth as by achievement. Her father, Prince Osuna Afubebo, was a great warrior, a wealthy man and an important figure in the history of Osomari. He had many trading and war canoes. He also had several hundred slaves who manned his canoes and traded for him. The slaves also fought for him whenever he had to fight other towns. Osuna Afubebo, who led these fighting men whenever there was a war to be fought, was known to have defeated many towns in battle.

Okwei's grandfather was the Atamanya (King) Nzedegwu of Osomari during the middle of the nineteenth century when British traders and missionaries were beginning to explore the interior parts of Iboland. In 1854, Atamanya Nzedegwu signed agreements with British traders, allowing them to trade with Osomari. Six years later, he invited Roman Catholic missionaries to establish a church in his town. He gave them land and protection to encourage their missionary work in Osomari.

Okwei also had prominent and progressive parents on her mother's side. Her mother's father, Obi Aje, was one of the sons of Obi Ossal, an important king of Abo. Like Atamanya Nzedegwu, Obi Ossal signed agreements with British traders in 1830. He was also well known as a warrior who led the people of Abo in all the wars with their neighbouring towns. Like all important and wealthy men of his time, he had many war canoes, slaves, wives and children. Omu Okwei was therefore born into families who were recognised as famous and wealthy, both by Nigerians and Europeans who dealt with them during their life time.

Okwei was not spoilt by the fact that she was born by famous, wealthy parents. In spite of her connections, she had to work hard to become a famous woman. For one thing her mother was only one of her father's several wives. She did not have a surviving adult male child. These factors, by Ibo standards, limited her claim to her husband's property.

Like most women in a similar position, she had to work really hard at trading or farming in order to support herself and her daughter. She was aware that her daughter could be in an analogous position. In any case, she knew that Ibo married women were expected to be self-supporting. Although women were politically and ritually dependent on their husbands, in practice, every woman was expected to contribute to the maintenance of the family. Indeed many women became bread winners and, as a group, they had quite a big say in the affairs of the family and town. For these several reasons, Okwei's mother was anxious that her only daughter be well trained in trading so that she could support herself.

Okwei's mother realised, like many of her contemporaries, that Okwei's path to survival was through trade. For trading in the local markets was one of the few occupations in which women could distinguish themselves among the trading groups along the River Niger. Indeed women controlled most of the local markets while men featured more in distant markets. Most men preferred for marriage, women who were very good at trading to those who did not know how to trade. Many girls, as a result, took learning to trade very seriously in preparation for their role as married women. They were often apprenticed at an early age to their mother's friend or relative away from home so that they could grow up properly and learn to trade.

Okwei learnt to trade from her maternal aunt who lived among the Igala. She left home when she was nine years old and lived with her aunt till she was thirteen. During her period of apprenticeship, Okwei learnt to speak Igala which, as we have shown, was one of the trade languages of the time. Okwei also learnt to trade in foodstuffs. First she traded in fruits and in vegetables. Later she traded in yams and poultry by buying from more distant markets and selling in local ones.

When she was fifteen, Okwei joined her mother at Atani, one of the ports of trade on the River Niger. Her mother had moved to Atani after the death of her husband. At this time, Atani had more trade than Osomari and was even more important than Onitsha. Onitsha had been bombarded by British gunboats in 1879-80 and its trade had not recovered from the destruction. Neither Okwei nor her mother had any capital with which to trade. As a widow, Okwei's mother did not inherit any of her husband's property, since as we have already noted, she did not have any male child. As a daughter, Okwei could only get some share of her father's wealth through wedding gifts in the form of household goods — pots, pans and plates from her family. As the daughter of wealthy parents, Okwei could also be given goats, poultry, ivory, gold and copper ornaments and even slaves, to help her set up her new home. Girls were provided with these items on the condition that they married with the consent of their parents, and in particular, that they married candidates of their parents' choice. On the two occasions when she got married, Okwei was not given any dowry, for, on both occasions, her husbands were not approved by her relatives.

Her first marriage was to Joseph Allagoa, a trader from Brass. Okwei met Joseph in 1887 at Atani while she lived and traded with her mother in palm wine, kola nuts, yams and poultry. Her uncles and brothers did not want Okwei, who, they argued descended from two famous families, to marry a stranger, whose family background was not known to them. Okwei however had a mind of her own. She knew what she wanted and would not let any obstacle keep her from achieving it. She married Joseph Allagoa against the wish of her relatives. So they paid her back by refusing to provide any dowry for her. Okwei and her mother therefore had to build up their trade from very small beginnings.

By the end of the first year, the marriage was broken. Joseph Allagoa had to leave Atani to go back to Nembe. Trade was bad and many Nigerian traders from Brass were finding it difficult to compete successfully with the Royal Niger Company. This British Company was larger, better organised and therefore better able to monopolize the trade of the Niger. Moreover the company made all kinds of laws and took many steps which made it very difficult for Nigerians to trade profitably. For instance, it paid higher prices than Nigerian traders could afford to pay to the local producers. The company asked the Nigerian traders to pay tax for trading in areas on the river which it now called its territory. Many Nigerians, especially, Brass traders who had been trading on the River Niger before the Royal Niger Company came, found these rules very irksome. But they could not do very much to stop the company since it was better armed. Many traders therefore went back to their homes. In the circumstances Joseph Allagoa had no choice but to go back to Nembe and, being poor, he did not leave Okwei any money with which to bring up their new baby boy. It is, however, not clear why he did not take his young family with him to Brass. Perhaps Okwei did not want to abandon her aging mother or perhaps she felt she had better opportunities for trade at Atani. Because she was strong and determined, she doubled her trading efforts since she had to support her aging mother and her son singled-handed.

Okwei's decision to stay on at Atani helped her a great deal. During the year she lived with Allagoa, she had met many important European traders and African agents. Many of them were Allagoa's personal friends. After Allagoa had left her, many of them helped Okwei in her trade. They gave her many kinds of imported goods like pots, pans, lamps, plates and clothes on credit. She travelled to many local markets along River Niger and exchanged the imported goods with palm oil, yams, vegetables and poultry. She supplied these local produce to the European traders and African agents who had given her goods on credit. In this way, she was able to build up her trade even though she did not have much money to start with. Many traders, Africans and Europeans, liked and helped her a lot because she was honest, friendly and very hardworking.

In 1895, Okwei met and married Opene of Abo. Opene was the son of Okwenu EzeIwene, one of the wealthy women traders at this time. Okwei's relatives once more opposed this marriage. They said that Opene did not

come from a family of rulers as Okwei did. They also argued that Opene could not support Okwei because he did not appear to be hardworking. Okwei refused to be convinced by such reasoning. Since she ignored her relatives' opposition to her choice of husband, they refused to give her as wedding gifts, household goods with which to set up her new home. Her decision, as we will be shown below, helped her trade a great deal. Since her husband was not wealthy or hardworking, she was not condemned to playing only a supportive role as many women who were married to famous men did. Besides, she re-located to Onitsha where her husband and her mother-in-law lived.

The Merchant Princess at Onitsha

Okwei's decision to re-locate to Onitsha benefited her trade immensely. Onitsha, by the end of the nineteenth century, had recovered from the destruction by British gunboats in 1879. By 1898, it had become more important than Atani as a port of trade. There were many more traders from different parts of Europe and Nigeria in Onitsha. Prominent among the Nigerian trading groups were the Nupe, the Igala, Kakanda, and the Brass. In addition, many more men and women from the neighbouring Ibo villages brought their farm and palm produce to sell at Onitsha market rather than at Atani.

From 1896, Okwei traded with her husband's mother Okwenu. They sold yams, vegetables and fruits in exchange for tobacco and cotton goods. By 1904, Okwei set up her trading unit independent of her mother-in-law. She became an agent who supplied palm oil and kernel to the Royal Niger Company. She exchanged these produce with alcoholic drinks — gin, schnapps, wine and brandy — as well as with natron, tobacco, pots, plates, lamps and matches. These products were greatly sought after by the Ibo traders just as the Niger Company wanted palm oil and kernel very badly.

The system of trading during this period differed from the present day system. Although Nigerian people in Onitsha used cowry shells as money, European traders did not want them. They wanted everybody to use the British currency which was issued in coins — one, three and six penny pieces — as well as paper currency. But the Nigerians would have nothing to do with the British currency either. The European firms got over this problem by issuing tickets or trade coupons to the Nigerian agents who supplied them with local produce. Each ticket or coupon paid for 100 measures of oil or bought a specified quantity of assorted trade goods, those imported manufactured goods which were greatly sought after by Nigerians. The agent converted the tickets assigned to him into trade goods at the 'factory' or shop of the firm. He then sold these goods to the local traders for cowries or battered them for palm oil and kernels brought in by producers from the interior. At the end of the day, he transported the produce to the company's factory. The oil and kernel were then

measured by the company's staff and new tickets issued according to the number of gallons of oil brought in by the agent. With these, the agent paid for the goods he had received on credit, and received a new consignment. He also received, as commission, a free ticket for every 800 measures of oil he delivered.

It was through this system that Okwei traded for the Royal Niger Company. It was particularly suited to people like her who did not have any capital with which to trade. In September 1904, Okwei received 400 'tickets' from the Niger Company. This means she brought in approximately 20,000 gallons of oil. Ten gallons of oil cost about five shillings (50 kobo). This means that Okwei made about four hundred pounds (eight hundred naira) from selling oil to the Niger Company during the month. This sum, for that period, was a great deal of money.

From 1915, Okwei concentrated more on the type of trade described above and spent less time on retail trade. She had acquired several maids and domestic servants who helped her in her trade. These servants bought produce from several inland markets in addition to buying from those who brought their produce to sell in the market at Onitsha. The competition between Nigerian and European traders for the products of the inland groups was so much that traders and agents often travelled very far inland and even almost bribed the producers with gifts of imported goods so that they could reserve their produce for them. Nigerian traders, like Okwei, had an advantage over their European counterparts. Their domestic servants and maids acted as their agents without their being involved in additional expenses in the form of wages.

Okwei realized, like some women in Onitsha at this period, that her business would be greatly enhanced by her influence both on Nigerian and foreign traders. To build up this influence, she gave out some of her young and beautiful maids as mistresses or wives to bank managers, interpreters, shopkeepers, clerks as well as to influential businessmen and company managers. These maids were of course expected to come back to Okwei's household whenever her foreign associates left Onitsha. Any property or children the maid acquired during her stay with Okwei's associate reverted to Okwei as the maids like slaves, could not own property under traditional law. Through these marriage arrangements, Okwei built up trade links with influential men like Chief Quaker Bob Manuel of Degema at the coast, Jack Cooper, the Niger Company Manager at Atani and John Windfall, the Bank Manager at Onitsha from 1916-1918. She also had trade partners and agents in all the ports of the Niger Delta — at Brass, Ndoni, Oguta, Port Harcourt and Warri. As a result of these marriage links, Okwei enjoyed very special treatment. She was always the first to be informed whenever new goods arrived from overseas for distribution in Nigeria. Many of her suppliers would reserve the goods she needed before letting other traders see them. Chief Quaker Bob Manuel supplied her with gunpowder; she bought ivory and corals from Chief Kio Young Jack of Onitsha and was able to get bank advance and

loans from Mr. John Gascoyne, the Bank Manager at Atani.

When Okwei's two sons grew up, they helped her organise her import trade and banking. Because of her foresight, she had realized the importance of education for the younger generation. She had given her sons the best education that was available in those days. By 1911, Francis Allagoa, her son by her first marriage, had become a District Interpreter, one of the few posts open to Nigerians in the then British Civil Service of Nigeria. From this post, He rose to become a Court Registrar before he retired to become the Amayanabo of Nembe in 1935, in succession to his father, Joseph Allagoa senior. Peter Opene, her son by her second marriage, was by 1917, already an employee of the Royal Niger Company at Onitsha. For over twenty years, Peter was a storekeeper for the Niger Company. Her nephew, Robert Olisa had also become a District Interpreter. Interpreters were very influential as they formed a link between Nigerians and Europeans. Okwei's sons and nephew were therefore in a position to help her establish contact with influential men in government or business circles. She depended very much on her sons' assessment of the many possibilities open to her in the market. Their advice was particularly valuable in the days when she traded in specialised goods, most of which were imported directly from England. In fact, by 1935, when Okwei could no longer trade actively since she had become Omu, (queen), Peter had to take over complete management of her business transactions while her son's wives supervised trading trips to markets outside Onitsha.

By 1920, Okwei and one Madam Iyaji, an Igala woman, ranked as the most prominent of women merchants in Onitsha whose field of operation covered trade in palm produce and foodstuffs: retail business, centred mainly on textiles, tobacco, hardware; and provisions bought from the trading firms. Okwei in particular became a buying agent for chiefs and influential men from the hinterland who depended solely on her taste in the selection of manufactured goods which they ordered from her through her servants. Since trade was still in its early stages of development and since transportation was relatively undeveloped, a great deal of trade depended on personal contacts. Those traders, like Okwei, who had succeeded in building up a personal network of influence and relations did better than others as traders.

Through these contacts, and through her retail and produce trade, Okwei gained a great deal of business experience. The meticulous care with which her trade records were kept (in spite of the fact that she had no formal education) is an index of her business acumen and was characteristic of her trading techniques.

In her bid to increase profits, she diversified her investment opportunities, and was often efficient, though ruthless in her methods. For instance, from 1926, Okwei became a money lender. She lent money to young traders, who like her in the earlier days, had no capital to start trading. From the 1920s, the modern professional Igbo trading class was

beginning to emerge as many men from the Igbo hinterland moved in to Onitsha to take advantage of the business opportunities which the market town held for them. This class of traders had very limited capital and Okwei's loan facilities suited them admirably. Since she was, in addition, the commissioned agent for these men, she gained doubly; if their trade increased her commission increased as well. Both the interest on the loans and the commission were ploughed back into business to be loaned out again.

Okwei also lent money to groups who had land cases in the British courts. Since land had acquired a greater economic value than before, land litigation was becoming a regular feature in the law courts. For the first time in the history of Nigeria, people were buying and selling land for money. People were so eager to acquire land, that very often one man sold a piece of land to two or more different people. When this happened, these different people went to court to establish their claim on the land. At other times, people in debt, or those who needed money very badly, pledged their land and fishing rights over a pond to wealthy people like Okwei in return for a sum of money which would be paid over an agreed period. Okwei's rate of interest on money lent to traders and land owners was very high, ranging from forty to eighty per cent. So high were the interests she charged that often her debtors preferred taking her to court to retrieve their land and fishing rights to paying back the loan with the unusually high interests.

The spectacular growth of Okwei's business enterprise resulted as much from her industry as from her ability to adapt quickly to market demands and to abandon an aspect of trade when it became unprofitable. During the first World War, for instance, the greatest market for Nigerian palm oil and kernel was closed down and the demand for tropical produce generally diminished. Consequently, hundreds of thousands of tons of oil which were stored at the 'factories' of the coastal and river ports could not be sold. As a result there was a slump in the produce trade. Okwei shifted her emphasis from palm produce to such specialised and expensive goods as gunpowder, alcoholic liquors, and luxuries like cloth (Indian Madras and *Jioji*), ivory and coral beads (*erulu*). At first, she depended on local dealers for the supply of these goods. Then she gradually established trade contracts with manufacturing houses in England. From these she imported an increasing and varied assortment of goods, directly. The bulk of her ivory ornaments and corals came from Messrs A.C. Taylor and Co. International. Naturally, locally based European importers did not like the idea of a Nigerian importing goods directly from England because they lost their profits as the middlemen between the manufacturers and Nigerian buyers.

Importing directly from England required more money and organisation than many Nigerians were capable of. In the case of Okwei, her close association with a bank for over eight years helped her overcome some of the problems involved in direct import trade. Banking had been

introduced in Onitsha by 1910. Since Okwei was well known to many trading firms and had business and marriage relations with many bank managers, it was possible for her to enjoy the facilities which banks provided to advance the business of their customers. The help that banks rendered to Nigerian merchants was resented by European traders. In 1922, a British merchant in Onitsha complained that the 'development of banks has meant a lot of injury to established traders; for every native who is able to save a five-pound note, imports merchandise direct from England and thus floods the town with cargoes'.

Okwei also displayed her ability to exploit avenues available for productive investment during the difficult transitional period when the British tried to enforce the complete switch to British currency. Although British sterling had been accepted in theory as the medium of exchange in Eastern Nigeria, it was not until after 1918 that its use was enforced. The enforcement of the use of British sterling was found necessary in order to fix a common denominator for all commercial transactions. It was also meant to replace the barter system of trading and the local and traditional currencies which had different values in different places and were too heavy to carry over long distances.

Even with the imposition of the British sterling on the trading groups of Eastern Nigeria, many Nigerians did not want to have anything to do with the new currency. For a long time trade was almost at a standstill. People with foresight and imagination, like Okwei, saved the situation through the system of exchange they introduced. The firms paid for produce in silver coins and currency notes. Since these notes had no value in the eyes of the local producers, they were quite willing to accept half the value of the new currency in exchange for the old. It is on record that one pound notes were sold for ten shillings or less and one shilling could be bought for three or four pence in the old currency. With the co-operation of the Niger Company and the bank managers at Onitsha and other trading stations, Okwei contracted to exchange currency notes, paid to the producers by the firms with the local currency still in circulation. The producer-trader was happy to receive two shillings in local currency for every five-shilling note or silver coin he gave to Okwei.

Through these various avenues for investment, Okwei increased her capital considerably. Before the economic depression of the 1930s', she had accumulated, by a careful and judicious use of capital, enough wealth to tide her over the depression. She invested her money in traditional and new symbols of wealth. She had earlier invested part of her money on acquiring, servants and maids who traded for her and did her domestic chores in the absence of wage labour. Part of her wealth was later invested in coral beads, ivory, gold and silver trinkets. These were very expensive ornaments which women of fashion loved wearing on ceremonial occasions. Okwei also hired out some of her trinkets to women who could not afford to buy theirs. She was one of the first people in Onitsha to own a private pleasure car. In addition to the car, she had

three lorries and scores of canoes with which she transported her trade goods from as far a field as Degema, Port Harcourt and Calabar. At her death, she owned several houses and more than a third of the land on the banks of the River Niger at Onitsha. This she rented or leased out to firms and individuals. Indeed part of the land on which the famous Onitsha market is built was owned by Okwei. She had also built a modern house for herself at Osomari, her town of birth.

Okwei's wealth and influence earned her social recognition in Onitsha where she lived. As a result of her popularity and influence in government and business circles, her second husband, Opene, was, in 1912, made a member of the native court and *Eze Otu*, chief of the Onitsha waterside settlement. This was a new settlement, the population of which comprised of non-Onitsha Nigerians, Ibo, Igala, Hausa and others. According to the 1931 census of population, the settlement had about 15,000 people. Okwei was an influential member of a number of social clubs in Onitsha. She was considered influential enough to be asked to perform the opening ceremony of the first African Tennis Club in Onitsha.

Madam Okwei was known and respected outside Onitsha and Osomari. In 1925, for instance, Isaiah Iweka of Obosi sent her a complimentary copy of his book *Ngbasa Akwukwo Akuko Ala Igbo — Akuko Ala Obosi* (History of Obosi). She bought more copies herself and sent a donation of ten pounds to help him cover the cost of publishing the book. She was one of the important personalities and the only woman to be presented to the late Lord Leverhume when he visited Onitsha in 1933. She was considered important enough in Colonial Government circles to receive the circular announcing the abdication, from the throne, by King George V in 1937.

Okwei's commercial and political interests did not, however, interfere with her duty to her children and her husband. Those who knew her very well could not think of her in isolation from her immediate and extended family. She was the solid core round which the family circle revolved. As a believer in the traditional ways of life, she urged her relatives and friends to respect Nigerian rituals and custom and save them from desuetude in the face of the disrupting influence of western education, Christianity and urbanisation.

Okwei, Omu of Osomari

Okwei's success in trade, and in dealing with businessmen and government officials, as well as her birth into a royal family became her passport to fame in the political life of Osomari. Her experience and achievements for the sixty years of her life as a merchant princess and the respect that derived from them, were given ample recognition when Okwei was crowned Omu, the Queen of Osomari in August 1935. The office was also in recognition of her interest and contribution towards the progress of the town. It gave her an opportunity to use her diplomatic and business

acumen in the services of her town of birth.

Her coronation was attended by representatives of the Nigerian groups in Onitsha — the Hausa, Nupe, Igala, Abo, and other Igbo groups in and around Onitsha. Each group displayed its dances, masquerades and other forms of entertainment. They brought presents of cows, goats, cloth, canoes and carved furniture — tables, chairs, door panels and carved elephant tusks. The coronation was therefore celebrated by all Nigerians with full pomp befitting such an important occasion. Her regalia of office consisted of ivory bracelets and anklets each weighing about 28 lb, long strings of large coral beads *erulu*, and *aka*, a crown of gilt edge and a rich gown of soft velvet with floral design. She was attended by two young, free-born maids, since she was not to mingle with slaves. Of all the women before her who had occupied this high office of the Omu of Osomari, everybody agreed that no other Omu, had been as powerful and as influential as Omu Okwei.

Omu Igili is one of the highest in the hierarchy of political titles in Osomari. The existence of the institution of *omu Igili* shows that even in a patrilineal society, like Osomari, where men are looked upon as more important than women, avenues exist through which women can play an important, though secondary, role in public life. One of the universal avenues for a political role for women among the Ibo is the council of mothers or *otu umu ada*, an organisation which unites all the adult daughters of a lineage or that of the village-group itself. The head of this council or *isi ada* plays a role analagous to that of the male village-head. Among the Osomari, the head of the council of mothers is the female counterpart of the king of Osomari, the Atamanya. She is expected to reign side by side with him.

The council of mothers is, among other things, part of the legal machinery which regulates the day-to-day relationship between the sexes in Osomari. The council is credited with more foresight and intuition than the men's council. As a result, it plays a very decisive part in the social and political affairs of the town. It also initiates many community development programmes which promote the general welfare of the community. It is for these reasons an effective instrument for maintaining order, unity and progress of Osomari.

Okwei's duties as Omu included advising the king and assisting him in settling disputes, especially those that concerned women. She also looked after the market and through her assistants, maintained law and order there. As the leader of women and the guardian of tradition, she supervised the feast of *ilo mmo*. This feast combined the rituals for the re-dedication of the king with the climax of the New Yam festival which the king initiated and celebrated for the whole town. The offices of the *omu* and that of king could only be occupied by members of the Ugolo family, the largest group that is said to have migrated from Igala.

In addition to her royal status, an *omu* had military, religious and administrative functions. She was the field marshal and her canoe had

to lead others in any military expedition. For she was reputed to have *utata su onaa*, a charm whose power derived from the women's goddess *Ossai Ndom Osomari*, as goddess of fertility and war who was also responsible for the welfare of the town. This charm made it difficult for Omu's shield to be penetrated by any arrow. The power which derived from the charm was believed to bring good luck and victory to Osomari warriors since they could become invisible to an enemy. *Utata su onaa* was also credited with the power of turning the Omu into a sorcerer in which capacity she could successfully propitiate the gods or ward off evil from the community. The office of the *omu* was reserved for women who had passed the child-bearing age as the holder was expected to observe several taboos. Wealth, influence, distinctive qualities of leadership, administrative ability and a high sense of justice were also prerequisites for the office.

Following her political elevation, Omu Okwei acquired a constitutional voice in the affairs of Osomari. As the Omu, Okwei was greatly respected by all sections of Osomari. Even in Onitsha, she was addressed as Omu and she handled problems which came up at the market at Onitsha. At Onitsha, she represented Osomari in government circles and became their spokeswoman both in the local government circles, among the Obi and chiefs of Onitsha, and the British colonial government with the District Officer, the Commissioner and residents as the chief officers. Although she continued to live at Onitsha after her coronation, she was very close to and visited the Atamanya regularly to give him advice on the administration of the town. She also visited periodically to perform her official duties and arbitrate disputes, especially those that related to affairs of the women of the town. Indeed it was largely as a result of her influence and her popularity that she was given special permission by the Osomari people to live in and commute to Osomari from Onitsha, for holders of high political offices were barred by a system of taboos and the nature of their duties from living in any place other than the town of origin.

Omu Okwei in Nigerian History

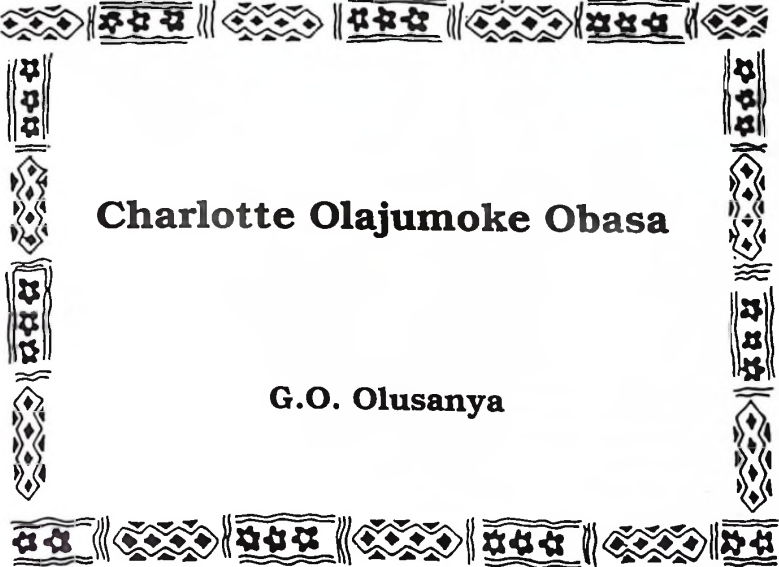
Omu Okwei rose to fame during a period of transition in Nigerian history. The number of innovations which British rule, christianity, western education and modernisation introduced, increased the avenues that were open to Nigerian men and women to achieve prestige and social recognition. Omu Okwei was among those Nigerian pioneers who contributed to the development of Nigeria by exploring both the traditional and the new avenues of achievement. In addition, Okwei refused to confine herself to what society views as the right place for women. She obviously respected age-old institutions such as marriage, motherhood, and the political institutions of her people. But she exercised her freedom of choice by transcending those societal conventions and practices that

stifled the maximum development of an individual. She did not however reject those traditional institutions that defined the identity and unity of a group.

For instance, as a woman of talent, she probably perceived that her path to fame lay beyond being the wife of a wealthy or famous man. On the other hand, she respected the age-old expectation of women that they should fulfil themselves as mothers within wedlock. But she would not let her unusual abilities be bogged down by marriage. She wisely struck a delicate balance by getting married to men who obviously gave her the opportunities she needed to make the full use of her talents. She also explored the traditional and the new avenues to social recognition. She successfully ventured into those areas which were traditionally regarded as the exclusive preserve of men without rejecting those that were recognised as open to women. Her attitude to change was therefore selective and noteworthy. She can be regarded as both a pioneer and a true innovator.

Omu Okwei's place in the annals of Nigeria has been acknowledged by her contemporaries. She was one of the fore-runners of many distinguished women traders in Nigeria who, in spite of their lack of formal education, have had an astonishing turnover of goods and have preserved a trading integrity which is the bedrock of the trust system. Her genius in trade organisations was acknowledged by her contemporary, J.M. Stuart Young, one of the British traders at Onitsha from 1908 to 1916. He admitted that she had the pull in being able to make her market and at her own price. She added to this a taste for politics and demonstrated her patriotism in her active interest in the administration of the town of her birth. The marble statue erected in Omu Okwei's memory as well as the naming of one of the main streets in Onitsha after her both testify to her achievements and have given her a measure of immortality. There had been several Omu before her, but it is generally agreed that Omu Okwei was the greatest and the most powerful of them all. Since her death, there has been no other holder of the title.

Perhaps the most fitting tribute paid to this illustrious Nigerian woman was that by the United African Company Manager at Onitsha who knew her very well. During a reception given in her honour at Onitsha in 1936, he said, "Madam Okwei, the Omu of Osomari, is a remarkable woman. It is due to her force of character, that by sheer ability, hard work and single-minded attention to business, this resolute woman has won for herself a name. Madam Okwei is not only a wise arbitrator, she is a sagacious woman with ability and talents unequalled by any woman of her time".



Charlotte Olajumoke Obasa

G.O. Olusanya



Charlotte Olajumoke Obasa's contributions to the development of modern Nigeria were immense. Her contributions were all the more remarkable considering the fact that she rendered services to the nation not for any selfish ends, but merely for the satisfaction of giving her best to her country. She sought no publicity — indeed, she deliberately avoided it. This is why it is very difficult to find any photograph of her.

In her last will and testament she ordered her letters and other papers to be burnt on the ground that whatever she did was for God and her country and not so that any memorial could be written about it. This notwithstanding, such an eminent historical personality cannot escape the searchlight of history. She loomed too large in modern Nigerian history for her deeds to be buried in obscurity.

Mrs. Obasa was born on January 7, 1873 into the leading stratum of the Nigerian society of her time. She was the eldest daughter of R.B. Blaize, a merchant prince of West Africa, philanthropist, newspaper owner, and a great African patriot. Her mother, Mrs. Blaize (née Emily Cole), came from an equally distinguished Sierra Leone repatriate family.

Her father R.B. Blaize, who was born in Sierra Leone was the son of an Egba recaptive. Like many captives and their children, he migrated to Nigeria in 1862 because Sierra Leone did not offer as great an opportunity for personal development as the present area of modern Nigeria, which was already a thriving centre of trade. He first took up a job as a printer in the government press and rose to the post of head printer in 1874. While he was a printer with the government, R.B. Blaize was already attracted by the prospect of trading and did, in fact, engage in trading in order, as he claimed, "to meet my necessary wants". It was no surprise when he resigned his job with the government in 1874 and took to active full-time trading. He became very successful, so much that he was able in 1900 to donate £500 (₦1,000) to the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine in memory of one Mary Kingsley. At his death, he bequeathed money for the establishment of the Abeokuta Industrial Institute (otherwise known as the Blaize Memorial Institute) for the training of young men in various arts and crafts, and a sum of £500 (₦1,000) to the Princess Christiana Hospital in Freetown. He had built up a thriving business and was owner of several properties in Lagos. A vivid impression of his wealth and style of living has been provided for us by an expatriate merchant who was his neighbour. He wrote: "Blaize seems to do a big cash trade.

His home is next door. He has a landau and a pair of greys with which he drives out occasionally, footmen and watchman on the box".

Clearly, Charlotte Olajumoke was born into a wealthy and comfortable home. She attended St. Paul's School, Breadfruit and then the best school for girls in Lagos, the Female Institution, which later became the Anglican Girl's Seminary. After finishing there, she proceeded to Great Britain and then to the Continent to round off her education. As part of her training she, with a chaperon, travelled extensively in Britain and on the Continent learning French, Music and the social graces of the wealthy. It was while she was still in Britain that her mother died. She had to come home to assume the role of mother at the tender age of 22 to her younger brothers and sisters, Ethel (Mrs. Gibson), Emma (Mrs. Savage) Charlie, Remi (Mrs. Akinsemoyin) and Olufemi, the youngest, who was only ten months old. She proved equal to her task and the way she brought up her charges won for her the admiration both of her father and of their family friends. The fact that she had to play the role of a mother to her brothers and sisters and housekeeper to the family as a whole and her natural disinclination to get married or have children herself, which she confided in her sisters, must have delayed her marriage. On Thursday, 14th February, 1901 she was married to Dr. Orishadipe Obasa of Ikija, an Assistant Colonial Surgeon.

This marriage was not only the talk of the town, but was also one of the most important social occasions in Lagos of the time. This was because of the popularity of both the bride and the bridegroom as well as the esteem which the bride's father enjoyed in Lagos society. The Governor, Sir William MacGregor, was present and he was not only a witness along with other eminent personalities to the signing of the register but it was he who in the reception that followed the wedding at Caxton House proposed the toast of the bride and bridegroom. The Lagos Weekly Record edition that appeared after has provided a vivid impression of the bride on that occasion:

She wore a princess robe of white Roman satin, embroidered with pearls finished off with chiffon with long transparent sleeves of lace. Her train which was borne by the sister and cousin, Misses Remi Blaize and Remi Williams was a detachable count, one of white moire, lined with white silk and trimmed with silk and a garniture of orange blossoms, and she carried a fan of real white ostrich feathers mounted with mother of pearl, with shoes of white satin beaded with pearls, and parasol of chiffon over white silk.

Yet her father had been opposed to this match, because Dr. Obasa was regarded by him as a pleasure loving young man who tended to live beyond his means. This impression seemed to be common amongst Dr. Obasa's contemporaries. But Charlotte Olajumoke was an independent-minded woman. Once she made up her mind, it was difficult to dissuade her from her goal. It was not that she bluntly stuck to her guns. She

worked hard to win her opponents to her point of view. That was how she sought the help of the reigning Alááfin of Oyo, relative of her father, to persuade him to give his consent to the marriage.

The Great Social Worker

Mrs. Obasa became interested in social welfare work very early in her life. This should not be surprising because of her strict Victorian upbringing which placed heavy emphasis on service to the community, moral uprightness and faith in God. These virtues which had been instilled in her did not desert her throughout her long and very useful existence.

Despite the fact that she had to play mother to her younger brothers and sisters, Mrs. Obasa soon became involved in voluntary social welfare work in Lagos, and the arrival of Governor MacGregor in 1899 gave her greater opportunities still in this field. It will be recalled that Lagos in the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth centuries was an unhealthy place. Sanitary conditions were primitive. Malaria took toll of the lives of many. Not much was done to grapple with these problems until the turn of the nineteenth century. In 1899 two men arrived in Lagos — Sir William MacGregor, the new Governor who was a medical man, and Sir Ronald Ross, a medical officer sent by the School of Tropical Diseases, Liverpool to investigate malaria. These two men were to play a crucial role in improving the sanitary conditions of Lagos and the general health and welfare of its inhabitants. Sir Ronald made the vital discovery that malaria was caused by parasites from infected anopheles mosquitoes. It was also discovered that standing bodies of water, constituted breeding grounds for these mosquitoes.

The notoriety of the Bight of Benin as the white man's grave "where few come out though many go in" was destroyed once and for all. MacGregor, for his part, welcomed this discovery and devoted all his energies to applying the solutions suggested. An anti-mosquito campaign was initiated. Tanks and other receptacles which provided suitable breeding grounds for mosquitoes were ordered to be mosquito-proofed or thrown far away, while at the same time, all government households were mosquito-proofed and the occupants advised to use mosquito nets and wear mosquito boots. In addition, MacGregor devoted attention to the problem of water-supply. He not only ordered that a net well be sunk on the race-course with the hope of tapping from a purer source, but also directed that a search be made on the eastern end of the island, Ikoyi, to discover whether there were springs available. The search proved fruitless. At the same time, he appointed a Government Chemist who reported that of the two hundred and eleven public and private wells in Lagos, twenty-eight qualified as 'suspicious', only sixteen were good and all the rest polluted; and that this had been the cause of the dysentery which had killed so many people. Orders were therefore issued that five new cement wells be dug with five tubes. In the next two years that followed

a total sum of £13,000 (N26,000) was spent on sinking new wells as well as cleaning and repairing old ones. A new regulation was also passed that all wells must be periodically cleaned out.

MacGregor's efforts were not limited to improving the conditions of his white officials alone. He directed his attention also towards the Lagos community as a whole in the prevention of malaria and other diseases and in combating infant mortality. In January 1901 he set up a committee made up of Dr. F.G. Hopkins, Dr. Obasa and Rev. J.H. Samuel to investigate the causes of infant mortality. In the same year he inspired the formation of the Lagos Ladies' League whose main objective was "the administration of quinine to children and combating infant mortality".

It was the formation of the League which provided Mrs. Obasa with the opportunity of putting fully into practice her talents and enthusiasm for social welfare work. She became an active member. She and Mrs. M.B. Johnson were appointed Joint Honorary Secretaries in 1901. By 1902 she had become the sole Honorary Secretary. To make the work of the League effective, Lagos was divided into districts; each district was placed under the control of one member who was charged with the responsibility of visiting the district, dispensing medicine, advising on child care and offering help wherever and whenever it was needed. Although the government assisted by printing leaflets containing instructions on the administration of quinine and infant feeding, the League itself raised the sums of money needed for its commitments. This was achieved by various means — by appealing for donations from leading members of the community, and by organising fund-raising events such as funfair and dances. For instance, a ball was organised by the League on the 20th of July, 1901, it yielded the sum of £82:17 (N165.70). It was decided by the society that the money be used for the relief of the sick poor. The League also made free use of the services of some members of the medical profession. The League had two doctors of its own who also offered free services. These were Mrs. Obasa's husband, Dr. Obasa and Dr. Cole. Apart from helping to tend the sick, these two doctors were also assigned the task of issuing certificates to any one needing help, certifying the true nature of the case and the need for relief. The doctors also gave advice as to what sort of nourishment was needed. It was emphasized, however, that the League's efforts should be directed primarily to the sick needing care and particularly to sick infants of poor parents and to baby care because, as already noted above, infant mortality was very high.

To be able to cope effectively with the responsibility of house-to-house visits in the district assigned to her, Mrs. Obasa learnt how to ride a horse side-saddle (it was considered unlady-like to ride astride in those days), for there were no cars in Lagos at that period and movement from place to place was either on horseback or hammock or by carriage. Although Mrs. Obasa could afford a carriage, there were many areas of the town in which carriages could not be used because the roads were not wide or firm enough. Thus the only possible means of transportation for effective

house-to-house visit was the horse.

The League did tremendous social welfare work in Lagos. In 1904, for instance, the Annual Report stated that 'much trouble has been taken in the effort to spread some knowledge of the elements of hygiene in the community.... Much of the time of one officer has been given to the service of the Lagos Ladies' League' and as a result of the work and of the numerous lectures given "nearly all European and many native officers take prophylactic doses of quinine". Governor MacGregor, the inspirer of the League, at a luncheon held for the Ugu to meet Major Ross of the malaria expedition in August 1901 also complimented the organization on what he described as their "self-denying labours" and asserted that "nowhere else in West Africa could such a body of earnest workers in the cause of humanity be gathered together". The members of the public were equally appreciative of the League's effort and the *Lagos Weekly Record* echoing this appreciation stated that "The League is engaged in a noble and good work which is not to be judged by the magnitude of performance but by its usefulness in rendering timely help to those who urgently need such help". These praises were not showered on the League without good reasons. In 1901 alone 799 people were attended to by the members of the League who found out that many of the patients were more in need of food and nourishment than medicine and several members of that body had been obliged to supply food and nourishment at their own expense. It was also observed at the end of 1901 that the death rate amongst infants was less in that year than in 1900, and both Governor MacGregor and Dr. Cole attributed this to the efforts of the League. In this "self-denying labour" of the Ladies' League Mrs. Obasa played a very significant and commendable role.

The League continued to be very active until 1908; but with the departure of Governor MacGregor, the main inspirer of the organization who had provided full government support for its activities, the enthusiasm of the League seemed to have waned. The Governors who followed MacGregor were not as interested in social welfare matters and the support which the League had enjoyed under his governorship was therefore no longer forthcoming. But what finally led to the League's inactivity was the hostility of a greater portion of Lagos women to the League because they regarded its members as 'detectives'; that they were government spies who came to inspect the houses in order to report the unhygienic conditions to the government. In some cases, the doors were slammed in their faces; all this on account of the water-rate agitation of 1908. In 1914 efforts were made by Mrs. Obadiah Johnson of Marble Hall to revive the organization but nothing came out of these. The League had ceased to exist.

This however did not dampen Mrs. Obasa's enthusiasm for social welfare. There were very many areas of life in Nigeria crying for help. Her attention was now attracted to the plight of Nigerian workers living on the mainland, particularly over the problems of transportation. As far

back as 1902 the administration had established a steam tramway service between Kokomaiko and Iddo, the objectives of which were to provide a link for travellers and goods between Lagos wharves and the railway terminus at Iddo and to serve as a means of conveying passengers on Lagos Island before the advent of wheeled road transport. The original line started at Kokomaiko on the Marina opposite what later became the Chief Secretary's Office (then the Botanical Gardens). It ran along the water-front in a northerly direction as far as Customs Wharf, turned east up Balogun Street, then into Ereko Street and over the Carter Bridge (which was opened to traffic in 1901) via Ashogbon Street to Iddo. The tramway itself was called Kokomaiko after its Lagos terminus. The fare was three pence from Kokomaiko to Iddo, two pence from Christ Church, Cathedral to Iddo, and one penny from Ereko Street to Iddo. Service was at 45 minutes interval at the outset but was increased to 30 minutes. Unfortunately the tramway was unable to pay its way on account of the constant closure of the Carter Bridge for repairs which made access to the Railway Terminus at Iddo impossible. Consequently, its movements had to be confined to Lagos Island. The revenue derived from carrying goods and passengers from Iddo to Lagos was therefore lost. In 1908 alone the tramway sustained a loss of £794 (₦1,588) within the year. Because of this, the administration decided to discontinue it with effect from 31st December, 1913.

The discontinuance of the tramway (now to be used for sanitary purposes on the Lagos Island only) caused a great deal of inconvenience to workers who had to come to work from Ebute Metta to Lagos. The plight of the workers touched a sympathetic chord in Mrs. Obasa's heart, and she therefore decided to run a bus service to replace the tramway. This was the Anfani Bus Service introduced in 1914, thus making her, and not J.N. Zarpas as is widely believed, the pioneer of bus service in Nigeria. Prince Modupe Paris on his return visit home after fifty years stay in the United States, recalled with some nostalgia in the Sunday Punch of April 1, 1973 what he remembered of Mrs. Obasa and the Anfani Motor Bus Service. He stated: "In those days there were just about four motorcars. I remember Mrs. Obasa, who owned three panel trucks (sic) used partly as transportation. She started the first bus service in Lagos — from Iddo to Obun Eko for one penny. I remember we kids used to get on there, hanging on to the sides without paying".

The regular route was Obun Eko to Iddo. It would appear, however, that on some occasions the bus service operated special services. For instance, Mr. Percy Savage still remembers going to picnics in one of the buses on Victory beach between 1924 and 1928.

Like the government tramway, Mrs. Obasa's bus service was not a profitable venture. Yet she persisted because she conceived the project as a philanthropic rather than a commercial proposition. To her it was the welfare of the workers that counted not the monetary loss. The service therefore continued until the late twenties. With the advent of J.N. Zarpas

Bus Service in 1928, the need to fill a gap left open by the Government since 1913 no longer existed. Her bus service therefore ceased to operate.

Mrs. Obasa's interests in social welfare work were however many and varied. She set up a fund for those who died penniless so that they could be decently buried. Her home at 25, Breadfruit Street, Lagos was a refuge for the poor and the needy. People flocked there daily to seek aid or help and none went without receiving one form of help or the other. She was generous to a fault. She gave generous financial help to those in need and in her last will she left legacies not only to institutions but to numerous individuals. Although she had no children of her own, her house was always filled with relatives and dependants, some of whom lived with her. Those who lived with her, even those unrelated to her by birth were trained and given a good start in life. These included Babatunde Oluwole, Akin Smith, and Edmund Ibikunle Palmer, to mention only a few. She sought jobs for the jobless and took considerable amounts of money to various people to help them start business concerns, most of which were not repaid. She was available at any hour of the day to those who sought her help and was a repository of the secrets of many because she never betrayed confidences. She also played the role of match-maker amongst the younger elements of the society!

A Pillar of Strength

In St. Paul's Church, Breadfruit to which she belonged, Mrs. Obasa played a role both as a leader and social worker amongst the parishioners. She took upon herself the duty of visiting the poor and the sick. To make this more effective she founded an organization for helping the poor members of the Church. It was the practice at St. Paul's Breadfruit to set aside a certain amount of money for looking after the poorer members of the congregation. The clergyman in charge of the Church was charged with the disbursement of the fund. Mrs. Obasa believed that the amount was inadequate for the needs, so she started the Women's Advisory Board to help raise funds to supplement whatever was provided by the Church. As the leader of the organization Mrs. Obasa went beyond the limits expected of that body. She hired at her own expense a house for the destitute poor on Victoria Road (now Nnamdi Azikiwe Street) and used her influence to obtain the services of government doctors to look after their health. She rendered a particularly memorable service which old members of the Breadfruit Church, including the late Archdeacon Lucas who was the priest in charge never fail to remember. This was the way she looked after the sexton of the Church when he took ill. She engaged Dr. Daddy Doherty personally to look after him. Unfortunately, the man died, but her act of kindness became a by-word amongst the members of the Church.

Indeed Mrs. Obasa became one of the pillars of the St. Paul's Anglican Church, Breadfruit and her life was an example to others. She had

refused to leave the Anglican Communion despite her marriage to a Methodist. At St. Paul's Church she gave such service and dedication that won her the admiration and respect of all members. She was very pious. She attended church once a day to say her prayers. Her motto seemed to be "The utmost for the best". She put forward the best effort at her disposal to achieve the best result. When the Church decided to buy a pipe organ in 1906, it was believed that a modest one costing £300 (N600) was adequate. Mrs. Obasa was of the opinion that this was not good enough. She influenced the committee in charge of the purchase of the organ to buy a better one costing £540 (N900). She personally contributed £100 (N200) to the fund. The organ was bought in 1907 and in 1959 it was sold for £2,000 (N4,000) — an example of her great foresight.

Mrs. Obasa was also a leader of stature in the Church. Apart from the organizations mentioned above, she organised the Ladies Musical Club. This was the club that performed Arthur Sullivan's famous opera, *H.M.S. Pinafore* in 1917. She was the director of that performance. All the practice sessions were held in her home, and being strictly Victorian in her outlook, she ensured that the male and female members of the cast practised separately. It was only when the production was near at hand did the group come together for joint practices. The performance, in aid of the "King's War Charity", took place at Glover Memorial Hall on 21st and 22nd of May 1918, the leading participants being T.K.E. Phillips and M. Akinsemoyin, both pianists; Miss Clara Benjamin (later married to Dr. Magnus Williams) as Mrs. Cripps; and Prince Oye Akitoye who was the Captain of the Ship. Other members included E.I. George as the First Lord; Mrs. Spencer Savage as the daughter of the Captain; Miss Roda Oluwole as first cousin to Sir Joseph; Mr. E.A. Meadows as Ralph Rockstraw, A.B. and C.P. Akande as Boatswain. Lt. Governor A.G. Boyle, C.M. was the chairman. The Hall was full on both nights to overflowing.

The performance was described by the *Lagos Weekly Record* as the best performance "originated and carried through by purely native exertions for many years past" and Dr. and Mrs. Obasa were commended not only for their ability and discernment in judgement which showed itself by ascribing appropriate parts to actors really cut out for them but also for their "indefatigableness and painstaking trouble taken to produce a first class play". It is of interest that all the members of the cast were Africans. The performances were as noted above, very successful and this was a clear demonstration of Mrs. Obasa's organizing ability and talent for leadership. She herself was an excellent pianist and taught many a girl how to play. Her knowledge of music was brought into full play in the production of the opera. Her musical interest and accomplishment were further demonstrated by the fact that she owned the only brass band in Lagos in the early twenties. This was the Alafia Band. The most popular hit at that time was *Lady, k'a lo wo Cinema, Cinema o dun la'le*, which translated reads: "Lady, let's go to the cinema house. It is good to watch a movie at night".

Champion of Women's Welfare and Rights

In the society at large, apart from her general interest in the welfare of the community, she was deeply interested in women and did a great deal in promoting their welfare and championing their interest. Her work amongst the Lagos market women will always be remembered. She not only visited the markets regularly, instructing the women on how to take care of their babies and on general hygiene and sanitation, but sought ways and means of improving their livelihood. One of the most popular morning meals amongst the indigenous inhabitants of Lagos was *ogi*; pap made out of corn. The way it was being prepared for sale was not hygienic and this made it unattractive to the educated members of the society. Mrs. Obasa got some of the women together, taught them how to prepare it hygienically and measure it for sale. These women passed on the knowledge to others. With the hygienic way of preparing it, *Ogi* became a popular morning meal not only for the illiterate but for the literate and well-to-do members of the society; and very many women were able to make their living from it.

She was also a champion of the market women's rights. Ebute Ero had not always been a market. It was marshland that was reclaimed by the government. Before its reclamation government decided to move the market from Onala to Ebute Ero. This was around 1930. On moving to Ebute Ero, the market women were asked to pay rent for their stalls. Considering that a number of them engaged only in petty trading, it was impossible for them to do this. They could not afford it without great inconvenience, and they made this known to Mrs. Obasa. She immediately took up their cause. She personally led a delegation to A.W.S. Rumens of the Lagos Town Council to protest against the order for rent payment. As a result of this delegation, government decided to waive for the time being, the order that the women should pay monthly fees for their stalls.

Mrs. Obasa was also strongly opposed to women paying taxes not because she did not appreciate the importance of taxation but on humanitarian grounds. Her contention was that the majority of women were petty traders who did not make sufficient money to live decently; how much less to pay taxes. She therefore regarded it as unfair to demand taxes from them. She led many a delegation to the government on this issue.

Her concern was not confined to the illiterate and the less privileged female members of the society alone, even though they received the greater part of her attention. It also covered the educated and the privileged who were still hampered by the attitudes of the society of the time. Until about the third decade of this century government jobs were not open to women. The only posts open to them were those of teachers or seamstresses. Mrs. Obasa, who believed in the equality of the sexes, saw this as injustice and she threw all her energies into righting the

wrong. She approached the administration several times to convince them of the need to employ women. Her patience and perseverance won success for her and the first set of women were appointed by the Printing Department. These were Mrs. Gomez (Miss Davies — daughter of Captain Labulo Davies), Mrs. Wright and Miss Lawson. She also succeeded in getting Miss Bisi Palmer, Miss Gertrude Shyngle and Mrs. Toro Johnson employed as shorthand-typists in the Secretariat, whilst Mrs. Adu, Miss Beckley and others were appointed as Health Visitors.

She was also passionately interested in female education because she saw this as the greatest instrument for the emancipation of women. She therefore provided both financial and moral support for the Caxton House School for girls, which was under the proprietorship of her sister (Mrs. Gibson). Indeed, it was she who inspired the formation of the school. She paid regular visits to the school to encourage and admonish the girls. All secondary school subjects except science were taught in the school, and because of the shortage of qualified female teachers, well-qualified men such as Mr. Cole, Rev. Sowunmi, Chief Aina Onabolu and Mr. C.A. Doherty were appointed part-time teachers. There is no doubt that the school contributed substantially to female education in Nigeria during its period of existence.

Cultural Nationalist

Mrs. Obasa's life was many-sided. She may also be described as a cultural nationalist. Although she was brought up strongly in the Victorian tradition as was typical of the children of the wealthy Sierra Leone repatriates of the period, nevertheless she grew up to become a great African patriot. In her early years, her dress reflected her Victorian upbringing. She always wore a blouse with a dog collar of the finest quality lace, a skirt reaching below the knees and boots reaching up her knees as a protection against mosquitoes. She always carried an umbrella which she used not only as a protection against sun and rain but as an instrument to prod the backs of young boys and girls whom she might find walking together on the street, a practice which was against the social norms of the period! Later in life, she adapted her Victorian mode of dress to suit local conditions. The adaptation is what is now popularly known locally as "up and down". The top part is a blouse and the bottom a long skirt wrapped round the body, with a headtie to match. In fact, people ridiculed her at that time for wearing it; but she paid no attention. The dress later caught on and is now very popular. Thus in a sense she was a pioneer of women's fashion.

She was also a great exponent of the use of indigenous languages in church worship, and in her own case it was the Yoruba language. This was because of her firm belief that the Church had to be indigenised if it was to have a firm root in the country and that in any case, communion with God was better done in one's language rather than in borrowed

tongues; that God himself created many nations and many tongues, and on the day of the Pentecost all those who were gathered together in the Upper Chamber heard the word of God; each in his or her own tongue. Throughout her life she waged an uncompromising battle against the use of English during morning services at St. Paul's Church, Breadfruit, Lagos. She came into conflict with Archdeacon Lucas on this matter a number of times and lectured him on the need for the retention of the Yoruba service in the morning. She went further to assert that any service that was regarded as important must be conducted in Yoruba. These included morning service, harvest service and services on other important occasions. She constantly campaigned that worship should be Africanised. She maintained her conviction with great sincerity and courage; and it was this fact which brought her into sharp disagreement with Archdeacon Lucas on the death of Sir Kitoyi Ajasa. When Sir Kitoyi died in 1937, even though he was a member of St. Paul's Church, Breadfruit, his body was taken to the Colonial Church (now St. Saviour's) for the funeral service on the specific instruction he had left. This was typical of Sir Kitoyi, "a black Englishman", who had more white than African friends. However, the decision was taken to have the outing service at St. Paul's Breadfruit on the Sunday following the burial. On that day, Lucas not only got the choir to sing a special anthem in English, his sermon entitled: "Then cometh the end" was also in English. This greatly annoyed Mrs. Obasa for two main reasons. First, because of her belief that morning services should always be conducted in Yoruba and secondly, because of Sir Kitoyi's wish that his body should be taken to the Colonial Church (European Church) rather than to St. Paul's to which he belonged. She did not mince words in admonishing Archdeacon Lucas.

Her patriotism was also clearly revealed when she helped to organise the market women for a reception in honour of Arthur Creech Jones of the Labour Party when he visited Nigeria in 1944 in connection with the Commission on Higher Education in West Africa. Jones was warmly received by the leading nationalists of the period, because of their faith in him and the Labour Party — a faith deriving from their pronouncements and their championship of the interests and welfare of colonial people. She was also a member of the committee that was responsible for putting up the portrait of Bishop James Johnson, the great 19th century nationalist, at the Glover Memorial Hall.

She was an uncompromising exponent of African culture. For that reason she was sympathetic to the Reformed Ogboni Fraternity. She could not and did not tolerate any affront to Africans by whites. Her attitude in this respect can be illustrated by the cemetery question. In 1936 the colonial administration decided to remove the Ikoyi Cemetery to Atan in Yaba. The basic reason was the complaint of residents of Ikoyi (all white) that Africans tended to make too much noise whenever they brought their dead for burial, although the official reason was that there was a shortage of land at Ikoyi. Atan, which is today almost at the

entrance to the University of Lagos and is now a cemetery, was at this time a thick bush. Apart from the great inconvenience that would have attended the removal of the cemetery to this new location, there was the implication that Africans were jungle creatures and their dead were better consigned to the jungle. This proposal raised considerable protests on the part of the African population. Mrs. Obasa was immediately on the war path. She assembled a large number of women at St. Paul's Churchyard and from there they marched through Broad Street to the racecourse (now Tafawa Balewa Square) and demanded to see the Governor. The Governor sent for her and two other representatives, and as a result of their protest and the opposition from all Africans, it was decided not to execute the plan.

In addition, as an African patriot, Mrs. Obasa shunned all honours offered by the Colonial Government. Thus when she was offered an O.B.E. in the early thirties, she rejected it on the ground that she was rendering services to the community not for the sake of obtaining any honour but because of her belief that it was the right thing to do and that her interest lay in the satisfaction of giving her best to her society, her nation and to humanity at large. Anybody familiar with her and her activities would not doubt the sincerity of her position. Throughout her life she avoided publicity. It was for this reason that she ordered in her last will that all her letters and notes be destroyed.

Mrs. Obasa's patriotism as well as her philanthropy should not surprise us. She inherited these qualities for, as we have already observed, her father was a great philanthropist. He was also a nationalist. He was a strong critic of the government through his newspaper, *The Lagos Times* and the *Gold Coast Colony Advertiser*. For instance, he strongly advocated the separation of Lagos from the Gold Coast and educational reforms. And yet anybody who knew Mrs. Obasa could hardly believe that she was capable of all these exertions. She was a smallish woman, delicately built and soft-spoken but in that small frame was packed such energy, such generosity, such determination and kindness.

The Basis of Her Achievements

The question may be asked as to what constituted the secret of her success in these various undertakings. First, was her deep interest and unflagging energy in these various causes to which she devoted herself. Second, was the fact that she was a very rich woman. She inherited a considerable amount of wealth not only from her father but also from her mother. Like her father, she possessed a good business sense and therefore ensured that her inherited wealth generated more wealth. She undertook a number of business enterprises, most of which were successful.

We have already referred to the Anfani Bus Service which was however conceived more as a philanthropic than a commercial project. But there

were other business enterprises she undertook on purely commercial lines. For instance, there was the Alafia Band which was hired by organisations and individuals needing it, and which brought in a handsome profit. She also had a large collection of musical instruments which were rented out. This apart, she ran a taxi service — The Faji Taxi Service with its headquarters at 54 Marina Lagos. This proved a successful enterprise. It also helped to provide jobs for a number of people who were employed as clerks, drivers, mechanics and messengers. As one would expect, both men and women were to be found in this establishment. Most of the clients were Europeans who had no cars of their own and therefore resorted to hiring taxi-cabs on important occasions. She was also responsible for the building of the Agege-Ipaja Road, purely as a business concern. She had observed that most of the products brought into Gbogunleri market in Agege (a five day market) came from Ipaja and the surrounding areas and had to be brought to market through bush tracks by means of head portage. She therefore conceived the building of a road from Agege Motor Road to Ipaja to tap the economic resources of that area. A gate was erected at the junction of Agege Motor Road and Ipaja Road and tolls were collected from lorries and other vehicles using the road. This, of course proved to be a profitable enterprise.

Finally, she found success in her various endeavours because of her considerable influence in Lagos of the period. This influence derived from the status and wealth of her parents and the fact that she was related to many leading members of the society. Many doors that would have been closed to others were found open. This was why she was able to secure jobs both in the Civil and in foreign and Nigerian commercial enterprises for many jobless people, and also explains why she was able to influence the administration as regards the employment of women, female taxation and on other matters already dealt with.

The Passing of a Great Soul

Mrs. Obasa lived to a ripe old age and enjoyed the best of health throughout. Her good physical health and energy derived from living a very simple but healthy life, despite her considerable wealth. She took exercise regularly and even in her old age she used to walk considerable distances. This was partly due to her aversion for cars. She never rode in a car or bus throughout her life. And it was indeed an irony of fate that her life was brought to an end by a lorry. In her 80th year, after recovering from a long illness, she was on her way to church when she stopped to speak to another elderly lady. While they were engaged in conversation a lorry driver carelessly drove onto the side of the road knocked her down and broke her hips. She was rushed to the hospital but did not survive the accident. Thus she ended a long life of usefulness and of service not only to individuals, but to the community at large.

Mrs. Obasa will certainly be remembered not only for her

philanthropy, her social welfare work, her kindness, her generosity, her patriotism, her deep religious life, her devotion as a wife, but also as a great champion of women's rights and one of the pioneers of women's liberation movement.

At her death in 1953 tributes were showered on her not only by the society at large but by the womenfolk who recognised her considerable role in the struggle for their betterment. Lady Oyinkan Abayomi in a tribute referred to her as "our dear mother and sister". She continued:

"She was a character by herself in her peculiar way. She had the love of everybody at heart, no matter to which rank they belonged. Mrs. Obasa during her life time took a remarkable interest in the affairs of women. She served as labour liaison officer to find work for most women irrespective of age. She hated indolence and laziness and strongly believed that emancipation of women must come through their own hard work. She cherished everything native, and advocated the wearing of native apparel especially by women. In the Church Mrs. Obasa was a strong pillar and she was in several church societies in most of which she was a leader."

And Millicent Douglas in her "Tribute to a great woman" wrote as follows:

"We miss her and wished she had been spared to be with us. But we are satisfied that her full life and splendid services to humanity were well spent. We are rejoicing that if such a rich soul has passed, she left the world better for her passing."

I am indebted to the following people who have helped me greatly by providing me with the data without which it would have been impossible to write this biography. Late Archdeacon J.O. Lucas, Mrs. Irene Adewakun (nee Howells); Mrs. O. Nicol (nee Coker); Mama Blaize (nee Moore); Mr. Kunle Akinsemoyin; Mrs. Ayo Solanke (nee Coker) Chief H.M.B. Somade; Chief E.A. Salubi and my father, Mr. J.O. Olusanya. I am also indebted to Sir Adetokunboh Ademola and Mrs. H.A. Adekila who introduced me to some of my other informants. In addition, I thank my wife.

Olaniwun Adunni Oluwole

G.O. Olusanya

*“Her politics apart, she did a lot for
the awakening of women of Nigeria”*

(Peter Enahoro, *Daily Times* December 21, 1958, p. 12.)

Adunni Oluwole is remembered not only as a female leader of great stature, but as one of the most colourful and dynamic political leaders of modern Nigeria. She possessed a keen sense of social justice which led her to involvement with Nigerian workers and she had a political style which was original and refreshing. Her place in Nigerian history is therefore indisputable.

Adunni Oluwole was born in 1905 in Ibadan, the present capital of Oyo State and the largest indigenous city in tropical Africa. She was a descendant of the famous warrior family — Jalaruru of Eleta, Ibadan — a city that started its existence as a war camp. It was from her ancestors that Adunni inherited the quality of fearlessness which distinguished her public career.

Adunni was brought to Lagos as a baby by her mother with her four other children. The mother left Ibadan with her children as a result of family squabbles. The family lived on Edwin Street, behind St. John's Church, Aroloya, Lagos. Both the Church and its Vicar, Rev. (later Bishop) Adolphus Williamson Howells, were to play an important part in Adunni's life, by exercising a great influence on her formative years.

Adunni had an elder brother, Olugbesan Oluwole. As a boy, he played in the churchyard of St. John's Church, Aroloya with the other children in the neighbourhood. At this period it was learnt that Rev. Howells was looking for a servant boy. Olugbesan's aunt thought this was an opportunity for young Olugbesan to have a good start in life. She asked Mr. Howells to take in her nephew as a servant boy, and he agreed. This was in 1911. Adunni who was six years old and who was very fond of her elder brother used to pay frequent visits to him in the parsonage. She soon insisted that she herself wanted to stay with the Howells, and they were equally glad to welcome her to their household. This action of the Howells is not surprising for it was the practice in Nigeria in the early years of this century for priests to accept young boys and girls from outside Lagos into their homes and to train them, even when they did not know the parents of these children. It was through this practice that a number of Nigerians were able to obtain education.

Adunni's and her brother's stay with the Howells provided them with the opportunity for education which would otherwise have eluded them, because their mother was by no means in a position to send them to school. They were both enrolled in St. John's School, Aroloya where Olugbesan finished his primary school education and with the help of the Howells, obtained the Elephant House Scholarship to proceed to the C.M.S. Grammar School. This was in 1920. After leaving school in December 1923 he became a teacher at the Christ Church Cathedral School in 1924. Later he left teaching and joined the Police Force on April 1, 1928. He retired in January 5th, 1961 as a Senior Superintendent of Police, and after retirement, was appointed Superintendent-General, Local Government Police, Western Region, a position which he occupied from 1961 to 1962.

In 1920 Rev. Howells was transferred to Aba, and Adunni, who was still in elementary school, went with them. In 1924 she came back to Lagos with the Howells and re-enrolled at St. John's School, Aroloya where she finally finished her primary school education in 1925, by which time she had returned to stay with her mother.

Her stay with the Howells exerted a powerful influence on her. Mr. Howells, according to Archdeacon Lucas, was a born leader of men, and he instilled in all those who came in contact with him the quality of leadership. This was confirmed by Olugbesan Oluwole, Adunni's brother; who himself had shown quality of leadership not only in the Nigerian Police Force, but in sports by forming the famous Africa Club (1928-1936) which included such famous footballers as Pius Quist (Pius Anthony who retired as Deputy Commissioner of Labour), Ayinde Oni later of Marine fame, the late Raymond Silva, Philip Owolabi (goalkeeper) Talwo Olumiyiwa alias 'let go me', and Alfred Labinjo. This club was formed to promote football as a replacement for billiards in international tournaments. Its objective was achieved in 1936 when a football contingent was sent to Ghana (Gold Coast) for an international match. Adunni Oluwole herself must, no doubt, have been greatly influenced by Howell's leadership qualities. Moreover, English was the medium of conversation in the Howells household, and it was because of this that Adunni became a fluent speaker of the English Language, even though her education did not go beyond the elementary school stage.

Although by 1925 Adunni was no longer with the Howells, nevertheless, she retained her membership of St. John's Church, Aroloya, where she became very active in the Girls' Guild and demonstrated her qualities of leadership. For instance, the Girl Guides used to organise Church plays. Adunni always took prominent roles in these plays. In the thirties she decided to break out of the confines of the Girls' Guild to organise her own play, using the members of the society as players. This play was staged at Tom Jones Hall under the chairmanship of Herbert Macaulay, the leading Nigerian nationalist of the period; and it was a huge success. Indeed her brother, who had up till that time encouraged her unsuccessful

fully to take up sewing as a profession, believed that she had at last found her talent so that he encouraged her to devote her life to drama, but she refused his advice.

An Itinerant Religious Preacher

In the mid-thirties, probably in 1936, Adunni terminated her membership of St. John's Church, Aroloya. The reason for this was that she claimed to have seen a vision in which God revealed to her that He was the God of living, not of the dead. She therefore objected to the dead being brought into the church for funeral services before burial. She broke out of the established Church to become an itinerant preacher of her own brand of the Christian faith. This action strained the relationship between herself and her brother who remained a staunch member of St. John's Church and was a chorister there from 1918–1942.

Adunni in her new faith achieved an almost immediate success. This was because she was a born actress and a powerful speaker with a wonderful voice — loud and melodious. Her evangelistic mission was directed mainly against Muslims who constituted a substantial percentage of the population of Lagos and Western Region. Her main theatres of activities. She proved to be an able organiser and a successful religious leader. She was a fiery and fluent speaker always bubbling with enthusiasm, which infected both her followers and onlookers alike. She possessed a good knowledge of the Quran and of the Yoruba Ifa Divination which she used to advantage in her disputations either with the Muslims or devotees of traditional religion. One important topic dear to her heart and which recurred constantly in her preaching was the question of rams slaughtered and eaten by Muslims during the Greater Beiram Festival (Id-El-Kabir). Adunni used to point out that in carrying out this act, the Muslims were commemorating Abraham's sacrifice of a ram instead of his son, but they were doing it wrongly because the ram slaughtered by Abraham was burnt and not eaten. Another topic was the age-old dispute about whether men were children of God or not. The Muslims claimed that men should be regarded not as children, but as slaves of God. Adunni's position was quite clear. To her Christians were the children of God, while Muslims were slaves of God. This is because Isaac from whom, according to Adunni, the Christians were descended was a promised son brought out of nothing, whereas Ishmael, the eponym of the Muslims, was a son born of a slave woman. She always emphasized, however, that it was possible for a slave to become a son of God, if he received the blessings of Grace.

For many years Adunni preached Christianity fervently not only in Lagos but throughout the old Western Region. It was therefore surprising when she made *volte-face* and became a Muslim. This cannot be easily explained. The only explanation possible is that Adunni was an unpredictable character. This was borne out by the fact that she later turned

round and became a Christian again. As a Muslim preacher Adunni was equally as effective as a Christian evangelist. Her enthusiasm, her commendable knowledge of the Bible, Quran and Ifa Divination, her fiery nature, her irrepressible energy were thrown into whatever she did. The keynote of her preaching is well summed up in a sentence which she used so often and which became known to many of her listeners: "God knows the number of your house". Fully developed, it means that man must do good at all times, whether in public or in secret, because God is ever watchful and knows those who are good and those who are evil. And though man may be incapable of detecting evil doers, God finds them out and doles out punishment to them.

What is significant about Adunni's religious activities is that they brought out clearly in her the trait of leadership. Adunni was a born leader, and she commanded implicit obedience from her followers. Moreover, in becoming an itinerant Christian and Muslim preacher, Adunni was demonstrating in an age when women's leadership in this area, as indeed in other areas, was not accepted, that a woman is just as capable as a man in achieving success in any field of human endeavour as long as she is determined to be successful.

Adunni and the General Strike of 1945

One of Adunni Oluwole's virtues was the possession of a keen sense of social justice. She believed that human activities should always be governed by justice and fair play. It was the possession of this keen sense of justice that brought her into the limelight more than ever before in the 1940's.

It will be recalled that the years 1939-45 were the period of the Second World War. The war had led to an unprecedented rise in the cost of living, because many peasant farmers had left for the towns to take advantage of the boom in construction activities which accompanied the war — the building of roads, aerodromes and barracks, while others enrolled in the army. However, the presence of armed troops and civilian personnel in Nigeria further increased the cost of living by raising the demand for foodstuffs. In this situation the working classes suffered terribly, as there was no corresponding increase in wages. In 1941 a Cost of Living Committee was set up to look into the conditions of the working classes. The committee observed that the rates of pay of the labouring classes had been too low in the past, irrespective of any increase in the cost of living arising from the war situation. It recommended a minimum wage equivalent to 20k per day and suggested that a Labour Advisory Board be set up to cater for the welfare of the workers. Following its report, increases and bonuses were granted to the lowest paid workers but this could only be a temporary measure as the cost of living continued to rise. When the 1942 awards were given, Governor Bourdillon had promised that the situation would be reviewed constantly so that wages could be

adjusted to reflect the cost of living. This promise was not carried out. The result was that the condition of the workers did not improve and many of them became impoverished. The situation was so desperate that in June 1945 a general strike — the first ever in the country was declared. The strike lasted for 44 days and virtually paralysed the economic life of the nation.

We have already mentioned that Adunni possessed a keen social conscience. The suffering of the workers struck a sympathetic chord in her heart, and she became a strong supporter of the strikers. She was to be found attending the meetings organised by the strikers, admonishing them and encouraging them to hold on to the end so that success would be theirs. Adunni's support was not only a moral one. As it would have been observed, whatever she did, she did with enthusiasm and all her heart. To relieve the suffering of the workers she donated a sum of £200. This was indeed a very generous gesture considering the fact that Adunni Oluwole was not a rich woman and that the postwar years were difficult years for all Nigerians. In addition, she donated two cows to the workers to be slaughtered for meat. She also fed those who came to her for food. This gesture was not forgotten by the workers. Adunni won the admiration of them all, and at her death the two rival trade union organisations into which the workers were then divided, the All Nigerian Trade Union Organization and the National Council of Trade Unions of Nigeria, came together for the first time to express their appreciation for her support and services by forming a procession and laying wreaths at her grave. Indeed Adunni's gesture arouses greater significance when it is realized that there were well-to-do Nigerians who professed sympathy for the workers, but did not match it with action.

The Colourful Politician

From 1945 onwards when Adunni emerged as a champion of the workers' interest, she became a public figure not only in Lagos but throughout Nigeria. The sufferings of the workers had strengthened her resolve to take part in the national liberation struggle. She now became convinced that the only way workers and other Nigerians could achieve better living conditions was to drive the colonial exploiters away. Adunni had always been a great admirer of Herbert Macaulay, and with the end of the strike, she turned her attention fully to politics and in this sphere, she equally distinguished herself. She was always present at campaign meetings and lecture rooms, where her smallish figure could be seen darting here and there.

Early in 1954 she announced her intention to form a political party of her own. She was not taken seriously because no woman had ever founded a political party in the country. But this was to underrate Adunni's ability and determination. In May of that same year her intention found fulfilment when she founded the Nigeria Commonsense Liberal

Party. The name of the party itself was a confirmation of her interest in the welfare of the ordinary folk.

Her aims in founding the party were basically two-fold. The first was to oppose independence in 1956. It will be recalled that in 1953 Anthony Enahoro of the Action Group moved a motion in the House of Representatives requesting Great Britain to grant independence to Nigeria in 1956. That motion had led to a crisis because the Northerners, led by their spokesman, Sir Ahmadu Bello, the Sardauna of Sokoto, had amended the motion, substituting "as soon as practicable" for "1956" on the grounds that Northern Nigeria was not yet ready to assume the responsibility of self-government and that for the Northerners to subscribe to the demand for independence in 1956 was to "commit political suicide". This had led to the Action Group members walking out of the House followed by those NCNC members who did not want to be outdone in the demand for independence in 1956. This finally led to the resignation of the Action Group Ministers and to the failure of the 1951 constitution.

There were others in the country besides the Northerners who sincerely believed that Nigeria was not ready to shoulder the responsibility of self-government in 1956 for a number of reasons. One of them was Adunni Oluwole who had hitherto identified herself fully with the struggle for national liberation. It was in order to champion her views that she decided to form a party of her own.

At the inaugural meeting of her party held in Mushin, Lagos on the 29th May, 1954 she made her stand on this issue abundantly clear. She promised never to cooperate with any of the political parties working for the attainment of self-government in 1956 on the ground that the measure of responsibility that had been placed in the hands of many Nigerian leaders had been grossly abused. She claimed that the common man for whom all political parties claimed to be working was in no way fairly treated. She asserted that politicians were playing politics with the lives and welfare of Nigerians and that in their drive to serve themselves, the common man had been sadly neglected. She emphasized that the ordinary man should be allowed to choose whether he wanted the best form of colonial rule with a policy of gradualism towards successful self-government or the worst form of home rule with its evils of nepotism, disunity, victimisation and "life more abundant" for a few. She promised that her party would not only work for the recognition of the rights of Obas and their release from the bondage of pseudo-politicians, but would also oppose constitutions which aimed at creating disunity in Nigeria, wrangling amongst political leaders and exploitation of the masses. Finally she claimed that most of the lofty ideals expressed by politicians in Nigeria were meant to obtain support for themselves, support which they would exploit to feather their own nests.

Adunni's opposition to Nigeria's independence in 1956 seems to have puzzled a number of people including Peter Enahoro who saw her action

as that of a stubborn and unpredictable woman and concluded: "Who knows, Adunni might yet have acted out of impulse and stubbornly stuck to her guns. If this theory is correct, then it was just like her". This theory is certainly not correct. It is true that the explanation of stubbornness and unpredictability fits into the general pattern of her behaviour, for we have seen how she deserted the established Church to become an itinerant preacher of her own version of the Christian faith and later turned to Islam, which was the main butt of her activities as a Christian preacher, and then returned again into the Christian fold. But Adunni's opposition to independence in 1956 cannot be attributed to sudden impulse or stubbornness or unpredictability. Properly understood, it stemmed from her possession of a social conscience and a keen sense of social justice. It was also a product of deep and honest reflections on the political situation in Nigeria and the activities in Nigerian leaders. Her position was made abundantly clear in her speech on the day her party was formally launched.

Indeed any honest assessment of the Nigerian political situation at that time cannot deny the truth of her position. Nigeria could not have achieved independence as a united country in 1956, because the North, which was more than half of the country both in size and population, was certainly not ready and was unwilling to be dragged into independence. The Nigerian political leaders themselves had not shown a high sense of responsibility in the use of the power they had thus far secured. It was also clear that the British Government would not have granted independence to the country in 1956 unless the demand for it was unanimous.

Adunni's political career, which was short, was as successful and flamboyant as her life as a religious preacher. Adunni possessed a sense of the dramatic which she injected into Nigerian politics and which made her very popular. She brought all her talents into politics — eloquence, courage, an irrepressible energy, her ability as a drummer — an unusual accomplishment for a woman, and an originality and freshness of approach to political campaigns which never failed to delight. In her political style and her understanding of crowd psychology she was a match for her townsman the late Alhaji Adegoke Adelabu, nicknamed *Penkelemes* (peculiar mess).

Adunni adopted the habit of dressing in a robe made of sack, which she wore with pleasure, and riding on a white charger. Taunted by men, she was unmoved. She used to ride through the streets of Lagos, chin up and looking straight ahead, without caring. It took a woman of unusual courage to do this in Nigeria of that period. Her courage and determination were all the more impressive considering the fact that she was acting against the wishes of her mother, brothers and sisters. Indeed her incursion into politics broke the already strained relations with her brother, Olugbesan Oluwole. Previous to this, the brother, who remained a keen and strict Christian, had objected to her leaving the established church to become an itinerant Christian preacher. He had also objected

to her unsteady marital life. That relationship was worsened when she became a Muslim preacher. The final straw came however when she turned to politics. The brother, who was at this time a Senior Police Officer in the Criminal Investigation Department, felt that his career might be jeopardised by her political activities. He had become a suspect in the police force because of the fear that his sister might, through him, have access to some secret information. Olugbesan therefore requested her to keep away from him so as not to endanger his career, while at the same time he managed to get a word across to the Inspector-General of Police that he had nothing to do with his sister's activities. But Adunni was a determined and independent woman. Despite the taunts by the crowd and the bitter disagreement with her favourite brother and other brothers and sisters, she decided to pursue the path she had chosen for herself. She even went as far as to denounce her brother publicly.

Throughout her political career she displayed tremendous courage. She was ever ready to suffer imprisonment for the cause she believed in, and at her campaign meetings she sometimes wore prisoner's uniform to demonstrate the fact that she did not care about going to prison and that she was wearing the uniform in anticipation of a prison sentence for her political activities.

She became particularly active in Lagos and in the old Western Region. As a party leader Adunni was equally firm and successful. She ruled the party with authority and forcefulness. This was a considerable achievement because it was not a female party, but a party composed of men and women and in which the men formed the outstanding majority.

Adunni's preoccupation as a politician was to struggle for the eventual emancipation of Nigeria and to work for the material welfare of the ordinary man. She was a strong believer in the unity of Nigeria and was strongly opposed to regionalization. This was because of her conviction that the only way by which the country could achieve rapid progress and play an active role in international affairs was to remain strong and united. She was also a great champion of women's rights and constantly demanded representation of women at all the constitutional conferences that were being held.

Her party was well-organised. Even though it lacked adequate financial resources and suffered two handicaps — its newness and the fact that it was led by a woman, nevertheless — it won a seat in Osun North (Ikirun), in the Western Region."

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- * The officers of the party at its formation were Miss Adunni Oluwole, President; Mr. M. Sami, Vice-President; Mr. L. Aromire, Treasurer; Mr. T. Oduntan, General Secretary; Mr. I. Dawodu, Financial Secretary; Messrs. J. Olanrewaju, Duro Adekunle, B. Sanusi and M. Adewoye were elected Assistant Secretaries charged with the responsibility of spreading the aims and objectives of the party.
 - ** The candidate was Mr. D.L.G. Olateju who defeated the AG and NCNC candidates, in the general election of 1954 into the House of Representatives — barely five months after its formation.

Her political career was a short one — three years within which she left her imprint on Nigeria's political scene. Her activities were all the more commendable considering the fact that she combined an active public life with motherhood (she was a mother of five). It is true that she herself did not get elected into any legislature, nevertheless, she had the distinction of being the only Nigerian woman who ever contested a direct election in her own right to any legislature; and it ought to be noted that though she was unsuccessful, she made history when a member of her party, D.L.G. Olateju of Ikirun, won a seat in another constituency. In her political career Adunni demonstrated once again the equality of women to men by positive action rather than by theory.

"Then Cometh the End"

Adunni Oluwole did not live long to carry on her political activities. On November 13, 1957 she was on her way to Ijebu-Ode to conduct a political campaign against the Action Group when she suddenly took ill. A few days before this, she had accidentally cut her finger when trying to open a can of tomato. She did not take enough care of this and the finger became infected, as a result of which she had tetanus. She was rushed to Ijebu-Ode Hospital and there she died at the age of 52, on active service as it were.

She was mourned by all, particularly her followers and the Nigerian workers. The female editor of the *Daily Times* in a tribute to her described her aptly as "one of the greatest women Nigeria has ever known". She stated that her political ideas were at times unrealistic, but that they were always indicative of her pushful and indomitable personality and that there was no doubt that Adunni was the "unheralded leader in the struggle for the emancipation of Nigerian women". She concluded: "We join in paying our own tribute to this great Nigerian woman, who died in the forefront of the struggle for our emancipation".

Adunni Oluwole will certainly always be remembered by Nigerians not only as "an unheralded leader in the struggle for the emancipation of Nigerian women", but also for her dramatic and sometimes flamboyant political style, for storming the fortress of male preserve, and for her keen sense of social justice.

Olufunmilayo Ransome-Kuti

Nina E. Mba



Olufunmilayo Ransome-Kuti was born in the first year of this century, 1900, and she died in 1978. Thus, in looking at the achievements of this great woman, we are indeed looking at our contemporary history. Many who may be reading this account lived through some of the events described. As for some of the younger readers, their parents and relations were closely connected to the incidents and persons with whom Mrs. Kuti was involved.

Our closeness in time and spirit to the life of Mrs. Ransome-Kuti creates problems with source materials of an entirely different kind to those encountered in recreating the lives of women like Queen Amina and Queen Kambasa. There is a wealth of written material in newspapers, government reports and records and private papers. However, many of the government records from 1950 are not yet open to the public and a number of the important personalities connected to Mrs. Ransome-Kuti have not allowed access to their papers. On controversial issues, each person has individual views and it is difficult to reach fairly objective conclusions. Unlike Mrs. Obasa, Mrs. Ransome-Kuti was very careful to preserve all her official and private papers and she allowed the author free access to them.

"Lioness of Lisabiland" was the respectful nickname bestowed on Mrs. Olufunmilayo Ransome-Kuti by the *West African Pilot* in 1947. "Lisabiland" refers to Abeokuta, founded by the Egba hero, Lisabi, in 1830; Mrs. Ransome-Kuti's inspired and bold leadership of the women of Abeokuta in their agitation against the Sole Native Authority, Alake Ademola, and against the payment of tax by women, from 1943 to 1949, earned her the appellation of "Lioness".

Early Life and Marriage

Frances Abigail Olufunmilayo Thomas was born in Ake township of Abeokuta on 25th October 1900.

Her great grandparents, on her father's side, were Egba who had been captured by Portuguese slave dealers early in the 19th century but were later repatriated by the British to Sierra Leone. There, her grandfather, Ebenezer Shobowale Thomas, became an Anglican catechist. He later returned to Abeokuta where he married and had a son, Daniel Olumoyewa Thomas, born around 1870. Daniel was a farmer who also traded in palm oil with European firms. In 1894, he married Lucretia

Phyllis Moyeni Dese (also born in Abeokuta of Christian parents), who was a dressmaker. Olufunmilayo was the first child of her parents, and therefore, was given the Yoruba nickname for a first born girl, *Beṣṣe*. She was followed by a sister, Comfort Harriet Oluremi, born in 1903.

Mr. and Mrs. Thomas were both literate and they encouraged their daughters to go to school. Olufunmilayo attended the CMS St. John's Primary School, Igbein, Abeokuta from 1906 to 1913. In 1914, she was among the first set of girls to attend the Abeokuta Grammar School, a CMS secondary school founded in 1908. Olufunmilayo took her Preceptor's Examination at the Grammar School and returned there to teach until May 1919. Then, sponsored jointly by the CMS mission and her father's cousin, a UAC agent, Olufunmilayo Thomas went to England, where she studied Music, Education, Domestic Science and French. She decided to drop the names Frances and Abigail and to be known only by her shortened third name, Funmilayo. She returned to Nigeria in 1923 and resumed teaching in Abeokuta.

In 1925, she married the Reverend Israel Oludotun Ransome-Kuti, first son (therefore nicknamed Daodu) of the famous Egba Anglican pastor, Reverend J.J. Ransome-Kuti known as the "Singing Reverend" because of his superb voice. Oludotun had been in the first set of pupils at the Abeokuta Grammar School in 1908. Before he proceeded to Fourah Bay College, he taught at the school and thus met Funmilayo Thomas! It was consistent with their backgrounds that they did not marry till both had finished their education. From 1919 to 1932, the Reverend I.O. Ransome-Kuti was the principal, Ijebu-Ode Grammar School, and his wife opened a nursery school at Ijebu-Ode. In 1932, he was appointed principal at Abeokuta Grammar School and Mrs. Ransome-Kuti returned to teaching in Abeokuta.

In 1932, Reverend Ransome-Kuti was one of the founders of the Nigerian Union of Teachers, and in 1940, he encouraged the formation of the Nigerian Union of Students, which developed later into a political association, the National Council of Nigeria and Cameroons (NCNC). In 1943, Reverend Ransome-Kuti was appointed the only Nigerian member of the British government-appointed Elliot Commission, to report on higher education in British West Africa. Ransome-Kuti was largely responsible for the decision by the commission to establish the University of Ibadan. Thus, it can be seen that Reverend Kuti was very much a public figure and in the forefront of the nationalist movement.

This background and marriage contributed substantially to the development of Mrs. Ransome-Kuti's political consciousness. From her Christian upbringing, she retained a highly developed sense of service to the community and of her responsibilities as an educated person to enlighten the uneducated. Within Abeokuta she occupied a high status position because of her education, her profession and marriage to a highly regarded public figure, the Reverend Ransome-Kuti. She was thus able

to capitalise on the traditional Yoruba respect for status and seniority.

Through her husband, she formed contacts with prominent Nigerian leaders such as Nnamdi Azikiwe, Samuel Akintola, Obafemi Awolowo and also with leading members of the British labour movement. Since both husband and wife shared the same moral and political connections, they supported each other in their respective activities. They had four children: Dolupo, born in 1926, is now a retired nursing sister; Olikoye, born in 1927, a professor of Pediatrics and currently Nigeria's Minister of Health; Fela, born in 1938, now a famous musician and Beko, born in 1940, a medical practitioner. All were educated first at Abeokuta Grammar School, then in Britain. The Reverend Ransome-Kuti died of cancer in 1955 and was deeply mourned not only by his family but by the whole of Nigeria.

Career as an Educationist

Mrs. Ransome-Kuti saw herself first and foremost as a teacher. We have seen that she began her career as a teacher in Abeokuta in 1923, then in Ijebu-Ode and again in Abeokuta from 1932. On their return from Ijebu-Ode, the Kutis lived in the principal's quarters of the Abeokuta Grammar School, which were in the same building with the students boarding quarters. Mrs. Ransome-Kuti used a room in the building to create her own nursery school called 'Mrs. Kuti's Class'.

In 1945, the Kutis purchased land in Kemta township, with the idea that when the husband retired he would open his own school. Mrs. Kuti built a primary school there called 'Mrs. Kuti's School'. The school contained a double stream of six classes up to standard 6. In 1955, after Reverend Kuti's death, she founded an evening secondary school named the Reverend Kuti Memorial Evening School.

In 1962, this school was extended to become the Reverend Ransome-Kuti Memorial Grammar School and Mrs. Ransome-Kuti remained the proprietor — and sometimes principal — until 1976. The school was approved by the Western State Government and received a grant in 1970. Thus, from 1923–1976, Mrs. Kuti invested over 56 years in active educational service.

Mrs. Ransome-Kuti was also a very active member of the Nigerian Union of Teachers (NUT) founded by her husband in 1944. In the 1950's she was frequently a member of the executive of the NUT. In the early 1970's, she was appointed chairman of the Advisory Board of Education, Western State, Nigeria, and was frequently consulted by the Ministry of Education, especially concerning the recruitment of foreign teachers. Mrs. Ransome-Kuti employed teachers from the old USSR in her school, mainly to teach science subjects.

In 1971, the University of Ibadan honoured Mrs. Ransome-Kuti's services to education and to society by awarding her an honorary Doctor of Laws degree. In 1973, Mrs. Kuti presented the Ransome-Kuti educa-

tional prize to the University of Ibadan to honour her husband's memory at the University which he had helped to create.

Abeokuta Women's Union

Mrs. Ransome-Kuti took the first step in her political career when in March, 1944, she formed the Abeokuta Ladies Club, which was a group of Christian, educated, women teachers and traders. At first, the club was involved in charity work, sewing activities and catering. Then in June 1944, a friend of Mrs. Ransome-Kuti's, who was an illiterate market woman, asked Mrs. Kuti to teach her and her friends to read and sew.

Still in the tradition of community service, a literacy class was begun and was so popular among the market women that the Ladies Club expanded to include market women in its membership. This led the Ladies Club to take an interest in the problems of the market women. Close contact with the Egba market women enabled Mrs. Ransome-Kuti and her associates in the Ladies Club to identify themselves with the problems of the market women. At this point in time, 1944, the market women were upset about the food and price controls imposed by the British administration as part of war-time emergency, which severely limited their trade. For instance, women were forced to sell food items such as gari and rice at very low prices to government agents. Sometimes, the agents confiscated the foodstuffs without payment, on the grounds that the government had to feed the soldiers.

In 1946, the name Ladies Club was changed to the Abeokuta Women's Union (AWU) with Mrs. Ransome-Kuti as president. Mrs. F.W. Fagbemi, Mrs. Eniola Soyinka (mother of Wole Soyinka, the author), Mrs. Victoria Soley and Mrs. S.F. Adeyinka were members of the executive committee. The financial membership of about 20,000 women was seen as the core of the union but it claimed that the rest of the roughly 100,000 women in Abeokuta were in complete sympathy. The membership fee was the equivalent of 25k and the annual dues 10k.

Although the AWU remained concerned with social welfare, the fusion of illiterate market women and the educated women produced a militant organisation whose objectives transcended the alleviation of hardship to the removal of the cause of hardship. It led to an awareness by Mrs. Kuti that all women were an oppressed group in Nigeria. She insisted on the equality of all women, always spoke in Yoruba and wore Yoruba attire so that the women would know she was one of them. The women's random grievances were articulated by Mrs. Ransome-Kuti and her small core of educated assistants into a systematic set of beliefs. Moreover, she maintained that the illiterate women were much bolder and more willing to sacrifice their personal comfort than their educated sisters.

Objections Against the Sole Native Authority (SNA) and the Alake

There were three different types of administration in Southern Nigeria from 1914; the Sole Native Authority system in the South-Western Provinces; the Warrant Chiefs system in the South-Eastern Provinces and a local township government in the colony of Lagos. Women were affected differently under each administration.

The sole native authorities were given unprecedented powers by the colonial administration with the result that the traditional powers of the king-makers and chiefs which had acted as checks on the *Oba* were removed. Though the chiefs were members of the native authority councils, the SNA's were responsible for some of the appointments and the councils were only advisory.

The loss of the traditional powers of chiefs, king-makers, *Ogboni* and priests meant concurrently the loss of the powers of the female chiefs, *Iyalode*, *Erelu* and priestesses. Where the male chiefs were able, if they chose, to enter the new centres of power such as the native authority councils and courts, the women were never granted access. The female titles rapidly became vacant and meaningless.

Under the SNA system in Abeokuta no woman was ever a member of the advisory Egba Native Authority Council. No woman ever served on the native courts. Women were not consulted by the *Alake* even on matters which affected them as a group.

Since the Abeokuta Women's Union considered that women's rights, interests and freedom were being trampled on by the Sole Native Authority, it sought the abdication of the *Alake*, Ademola II, and the abolition of the Sole Native Authority system. Since the *Alake* was the SNA, opposition to the system tended to take the form of criticisms of the person of the *Alake*. In fact, of course, the source of real power was the colonial government which created this post, but this was not often understood by the general public.

The AWU documented in great detail its grievances against the *Alake* as a person. For example; his alleged abuses of food and price controls, interference in trade, attempts to set up monopolies by using his position to obtain privileges from the firms; interference in court matters, abuses of dowry payments; exploitation and corruption in the leasing of land and building regulations. The union also stated its objections to the SNA system:

"The system of SNA had been a great source of oppression and suppression to the Egba people. Even most of the members of the Council were not free to express their minds. The *Alake* always posed as 'Mr. Know All'. The Egba women would very much like this power of SNA removed because we are not happy under it. It is foreign to the customs of Egba".

The union complained of crimes committed by the SNA police and Parakoyi against which the SNA provided no redress. Furthermore, the AWU argued, it was not as though the women received special benefits as a result of paying flat rate tax; the Abeokuta SNA had failed to provide adequate welfare, medical and educational facilities for women and their children.

However, the union did not simply protest by criticism, it also put forward constructive suggestions.

The AWU employed an accountant to go into the books of the SNA treasury and prepare a very detailed report of the expenditure. After documenting the unnecessary expenditure as the equivalent of ₦49,412.00, it concluded that with sensible expenditure women need not pay tax and the administration would not lose money. The report proposed constructive measures to increase expenditure. The AWU also donated ₦1,000.00 to the Egba Council in 1949 for the building of market stalls.

The climax of the women's arguments against the flat rate tax was that there should be 'no taxation without representation'. The AWU's own publication, "The fall of a ruler or the freedom of Egba land" was prefaced by an extract from the Declaration of American Independence. The AWU demanded that women should be represented on the council and all other committees that were concerned with Egba affairs by members of the AWU. The union saw itself as representing all the women in Abeokuta.

Objections to Taxation of Women

There were two kinds of taxes: income tax based on an assessment of a person's income and flat-rate (or poll) tax.

The female poll tax was introduced by the Abeokuta and Ijebu native authorities in 1914 and not in Lagos or anywhere else in Southern Nigeria. Girls were taxed from the age of 15, boys at 17. Wives were taxed separately from their husbands. The payment of flat rate tax by the women in Abeokuta and Ijebu provinces was insisted upon by the British officials. The tax collection in Abeokuta was farmed out to the Ogboni chiefs who were paid the equivalent of ₦2,000.00 p.a. in return.

The actual collection process was often brutal; for example, women were often stripped naked by tax collectors to see whether they were old enough to pay tax. This brutality was defended by the Alake on the grounds that chasing tax defaulters was more effective than prosecutions or fines. The system had been severely criticised by Egba people, but without any effect.

The AWU demanded the abolition of the flat rate tax on women because: women were already helping their men to pay taxes; usually the women were responsible for the feeding and education of their children; women were already paying water rate tax. It did not object to the special assessment income tax; women who qualified could afford to pay. The

Alake and the British officials argued that the women could well afford to pay the sum of 30k per annum, that exemption was given to deserving cases and that Abeokuta could not manage without revenue from the women's flat rate tax.

In summary, the objectives of the AWU were the abolition of the female flat rate tax, the removal of Ademola as *Alake*, the abolition of the SNA system and the representation and participation of women in the reformed system of administration. The changes sought were reformist, not revolutionary structural changes. The AWU did not wish to dismantle the whole system but to change those parts of it which operated against their interests and to ensure that women were accommodated in the system. The AWU rejected the form or norm which colonial rule took in Abeokuta; it did not reject the colonial system. The union criticised the support given to the *Alake* by the local British officials but did so by appealing to the colonial government in Lagos and to the British government in London. In its propaganda, the AWU regularly criticised the SNA system as a violation of British justice and democracy. It used the fact of the suffrage and representation of women in the British government as a basis for its demands for representation of Egba women.

The Campaign

In the early stage, between 1946 and May 1947, the AWU employed the strategy of writing petitions to the colonial authorities and the *Alake* to repeal taxation on women and to correct abuses committed by the *Alake* and his agents.

Mrs. Ransome-Kuti also wrote a number of letters to the editors of *Daily Service* and *West African Pilot* and held several press conferences.

In May 1947, Mrs. Ransome-Kuti adopted the tactic — to be repeated several times — of refusing to pay her tax in order to dramatise the inability of Egba women to pay tax. In each case, however, the fines for tax default were paid anonymously (probably by the local officials or the *Alake*).

When none of the above strategies succeeded the AWU adopted a more drastic approach and organised mass demonstrations and rallies.

The first mass demonstration took place on the 29th November, 1947, when thousands of women sat on the grounds of the *Alake's* palace (the *Ààfin*) for 24 hours. On December 8, the women repeated the 'vigil', this time for 48 hours.

During the vigil outside the *Ààfin*, which today would be described as a "sit-in" or as civil disobedience, the women carried out mock traditional sacrifices and funeral rites for Ademola. They sang abusive songs calling for the *Alake* to go, for example:

Ademola Ojibesho
Big man with a big ulcer
Your behaviour is deplorable
Alake is a thief

Council members thieves
Anyone who does not know Kuti will get into trouble
White man you will not get to your country safely
You and Alake will not die an honourable death.
(Translated by Mrs. Ransome-Kuti).

The discipline and orderliness displayed by the women was remarkable. All markets were closed; the women organised food, water and sanitary facilities. The solidarity of the women was impressive: there was a shared consciousness of women being victimised by the all male SNA. Mrs. Ransome-Kuti's leadership was charismatic and never questioned. She elicited deep affection and loyalty from the members of the AWU who regarded her as "their king who made their life better".

Mrs. Ransome-Kuti showed courage in facing the police and judges and even had a physical fight with a district officer (February 12, 1948). She was an eloquent and compelling speaker, using expressive, idiomatic language and a very sharp wit. She always spoke in Yoruba to the women and insisted on speaking Yoruba to the British officials and on their replies being translated into Yoruba as well. She had a flair for the dramatic; en route to the first vigil outside the *Aḡfin* she commanded the women to stop and close their eyes. She ordered all those women who were afraid to withdraw immediately while everybody closed their eyes. According to Mrs. Kuti, none did. At the *Aḡfin*, the Resident demanded to know what they were doing there. Mrs. Ransome-Kuti answered "This is our father's palace; we have come to enjoy with you, *Kabiyesi*".

After the December rally, some of the men in Abeokuta, who belonged to a reform society known as the *Majeobaje* (do not let things get out of hand) Society, held a mass meeting and expressed support for the women. The *Majeobaje* Society (MS) had been formed in secret in the beginning of 1947; it was very critical of the *Alake*. The *Majeobaje* Society and the Abeokuta Women Union worked closely together in 1948. The co-operation was facilitated by the fact that its president was the husband of Mrs. Ransome-Kuti and its secretary the husband of Mrs. F.W. Fagbemi. The *Majeobaje* Society urged the *Alake* to raise the men's tax and abolish the women's. The *Alake* replied that it was not in his power to abolish the taxation of women and that Abeokuta needed the revenue.

The women continued their campaign; on the 28th April 1948, they carried out a five-hour march through the streets of Abeokuta. Then, the *Alake* was finally shaken; he agreed to suspend taxation, to appoint a committee to examine taxation and in principle to admit women to the council. An uneasy peace followed during which, in June, the *Alake* went to Jos for a holiday. During his absence, the *Ogboni* chiefs, who had been his strongest supporters, decided to ride the women's band wagon in order to achieve their own aims. Before the Sole Native Authority system was introduced, the *Ogboni* were very powerful in Abeokuta but under the Sole Native Authority system they had lost their powers. The *Ogboni*

passed a resolution on the 4th of July which rejected the Sole Native Authority system as "not in accordance with native law and custom", rejected Ademola as their *Oba*; complained that Ademola had seized their powers and privileges, especially that of tax collection.

When the *Alake* returned from Jos, the *Ogboni* also resorted to the traditional method of signifying their rejection of an *Alake*: they sounded the traditional bell and beat the drums. The *Alake's* reply to the resolution was to accept all demands, including the end of the Sole Native Authority system, except that of his abdication. The *Ogboni* then boycotted meetings of the Egba Council. The women held mass demonstrations again on the 7th and 8th of July and now the whole town was in a state of unrest. The administration came to a standstill after a third meeting of the council had to be cancelled.

Violence broke out on the 26th of July when a mob of young men demonstrated against the supporters of the *Alake*. The *Alake* on the 26th of July relinquished his position as Sole Native Authority to become chairman of the Egba Council. The women demonstrated again on the 27th and 28th of July, insisting this time on Ademola's abdication as *Alake*. The *Alake* held consultations with the Resident and the Chief Commissioner for the Western Provinces who advised him to leave Abeokuta since his presence was a constant threat of further disorders. On the 9th of July, 1948, Ademola left Abeokuta, for Osogbo, with these words:

I cannot bear any longer the sight of turmoil, strife and discontent. I have therefore decided ... in order to avoid blood shed, to leave the environs, of my territory in the hope that after a time, frayed tempers will subside and atmosphere of calm prevail.

After Ademola's departure, an Egba Interim Council was formed to replace the Egba Native Authority Council. The membership of the council was expanded to include four women who were nominated to represent the four sections of Abeokuta. Four additional members representing the 'educated elements' were nominated and these came from the Majeobaje Society. The first act of the interim council was to abolish all taxation for women, including water rates, and to increase the flat rate tax for men.

The Abeokuta Women's Union continued to demand the abdication of the *Alake* and finally Ademola did abdicate in January 1949. Mrs. Ransome-Kuti had toppled one of the most powerful traditional rulers in Nigeria. Thus, by January 1949, the main objectives of the AWU had been achieved. The flat rate tax of women had been abolished and women were given representation in the new system of administration. This is not to say that the Abeokuta Women's Union was entirely responsible for these results. The Sole Native Authority system in the Western provinces was already in the process of change. The initiative of the women accelerated the process in Abeokuta. The women were assisted by the Majeobaje

Society and the *Ogboni* but it had required the example of the Abeokuta Women's Union to ginger those groups into action.

Mrs. Kuti in Abeokuta Local Politics

As a result of her activities with the Abeokuta Women's Union Mrs. Ransome-Kuti had become very prominent in Abeokuta local politics and development. She was nominated by the Resident to represent Abeokuta Province at the Provincial Conference on a proposed new constitution from 1948 to 1951, the only female representative among twenty-seven males.

At the conference, Mrs. Ransome-Kuti argued against the electoral college system and the requirement that a candidate for election should lodge a deposit. She demanded, constantly, that women be enfranchised. She objected to any traditional ruler standing for election.

In 1951, she was a candidate for election to the House of Assembly in the Egba Division, but was defeated. Very few women were qualified at the time to vote, as payment of tax was a qualification. Full free franchise for women in Southern Nigeria was not implemented until the 1959 Federal elections and women in the North did not get the vote until 1976.

Mrs. Ransome-Kuti remained a member of the Egba Council (later the Abeokuta Urban District Council) on and off, from 1949 to 1960. From 1958 to 1960, she was the leader of the NCNC opposition party on the council. In 1952, the council, against the opposition of Mrs. Ransome-Kuti and its other women members, imposed a water rate on women. Mrs. Kuti and the Abeokuta Women's Union campaigned vigorously against it since again it applied only to women in their province. They refused to pay. Mrs. Ransome-Kuti and several other women were arrested for non-payment of the water rate. The agitation continued until 1953, when the Western Region Government took over the levying of water and electricity rates in the whole of the Western Region.

In 1959, the Abeokuta Women's Union again attacked the payment of water rates by women and directed the agitation against the Western Region Government. It claimed that since the earnings of the women were so intertwined with those of their husbands, a separate assessment of women for rates was impossible and unfair. Mrs. Ransome-Kuti was arrested for inciting women not to pay the water rate. Her trial attracted a lot of publicity because she claimed that the President of the Customary Court, Chief Ilori, wanted to jail her because she had refused his attempt to recruit her for the Action Group political party. Nonetheless, Mrs. Ransome-Kuti was discharged and in 1960, the government abolished the water rates for women.

The Nigerian Women's Union

Under Mrs. Ransome-Kuti's leadership, the Abeokuta Women's Union

developed in 1949, into a national women's organisation, the Nigerian Women's Union, which acted as a pressure group to improve the position of all Nigerian women. Mrs. Ransome-Kuti and other leaders of the Abeokuta Women's Union such as Mrs. Alice Osimosu, visited women in neighbouring sole native authorities, such as Egbado, Ijebu-Ode, and Ijebu-Remo and encouraged them to also agitate against the payment of tax by women and reject the sole native authorities. These movements were similarly successful. From there, Mrs. Kuti went on to tour the country and to help establish branches of the Nigerian Women's Union in, notably, Enugu, Aba, (where Mrs. Margaret Ekpo, another female political leader, was already active), Calabar, Benin, Jos and Lagos. The union and its successor in 1953, the Federation of Nigerian Women's Societies, continually pressured first the colonial administration, then the Nigerian government, to nominate women into local councils, to give the vote to women in the North, to extend educational opportunities for women and to improve the social status of women. Mrs. Kuti was the president of the Nigerian Women's Union and Federation of Nigerian Women's Societies but she was given effective support by other notable women such as Mrs. Ekpo, Mrs. Henrietta Lawson, Mrs. Keziah Fashina, Mrs. Janet Okala and Alhaja Sawaba Gambo of the Northern Elements Political Union (NEPU) women's wing. Between them, these women articulated the interests and aspirations of the "silent majority" of Nigerian women and gave them a voice with which to speak to government.

International Connections

Mrs. Ransome-Kuti was responsible for giving the Federation of Nigerian Women's Societies international affiliation to the Women's International Democratic Federation, of which in 1953, she was made world vice-president. In the course of her activities as Vice-President, she visited a number of countries, including China, in 1956. This made the British and Nigerian Governments suspect that Mrs. Ransome-Kuti had communist sympathies and in 1957, the Government in Nigeria refused to renew her passport. There was great public outcry and eventually, her passport was renewed. However, when Mrs. Ransome-Kuti was invited to an International Women's Organisations conference to be held in United States of America in 1958, the US government denied her a visa due to her alleged communist connections. In fact Mrs. Ransome-Kuti was never a member of any communist party nor did she support communism. When accused of being a communist, Mrs. Ransome-Kuti retorted that her father had been a farmer in the African communal system and asked whether that made him a communist. If so, she was also a communist.

She was a socialist and believed in democratic government. In this regard, her sympathies were closest to the left wing of the British Labour

Party, members of which, like Arthur Creech Jones, Reverend Sorenson, and Hugh Foot, were her personal friends. Mrs. Kuti admired Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, with whom she had personal contacts. She often discussed with Nkrumah the idea of a continental organisation of African women. Mrs. Ransome-Kuti visited and conferred with African women's organisations all over the continent, maintaining especially close relations with women in Algeria, Egypt and Ghana. She counseled Nigerian women not to forget their sisters in other parts of Africa; "When any section of African people is still in slavery, no independent section can be truly happy". True to her word, when the Sharpeville massacre occurred in South Africa in 1960, Mrs. Ransome-Kuti was in contact with African National Congress representatives in Algiers and denounced vehemently the incident.

National Political Activities

Since it was the Nigerian Union of Students, of which the Reverend Kuti was founder and patron, which promoted the formation of the National Council of Nigerian and Cameroon in 1944, Mrs. Ransome-Kuti was closely associated with the inception of the party. It was in view of the fact that Mrs. Ransome-Kuti was already active and well known as a leading woman in the National Council of Nigerian and Cameroon that Dr. Azikiwe selected her as the representative of the women of Nigeria as well as the Western region in the NCNC delegation to London in 1947. The purpose of the delegation was to let the British government know first hand the feelings of Nigerians about the Richard's constitution.

During the delegation's visit, Mrs. Ransome-Kuti received special attention from the British press and public. At a meeting held by the Lord Mayor of Manchester, Mrs. Ransome-Kuti, by special request, was asked to talk about the problems of women. Mrs. Creech Jones, the wife of the Colonial Secretary, arranged for her to speak to various women's organisations and she wrote an article on Nigerian women for the London Daily Worker. This article became very controversial because Mrs. Ransome-Kuti presented a negative picture of women in Nigeria. Before colonialism, she argued, women in Nigerian had held much greater economic and political power. The article was titled "We Had Equality 'till Britain Came", and stated in part:

Before the British advent in Nigeria ... there was division of labour between men and women; ... men owned property, traded and exercised considerable political and social influence in society With the advent of British rule ... instead of the women being educated and assisted ... their condition has deteriorated .

The article went on to appeal to the women of Britain to support women's movements in Nigeria. Mrs. Kuti ended by making the point that her remarks were not against the British people, but against exploitation.

On her return from England, Mrs. Ransome-Kuti was fully absorbed in the activities of the Abeokuta Women's Union and the Federation of Nigerian Women's Societies. Though she maintained the separateness of these organisations from the NCNC, there is no doubt that they were NCNC oriented. Mrs. Ransome-Kuti was an active member of the NCNC and in 1956 was elected Treasurer of the Western Nigerian Working Committee of the NCNC.

In the 1959 elections, Mrs. Ransome-Kuti decided to contest a seat to the House of Representatives. Initially her candidacy was supported by the Egba NCNC secretariat and she was slated to be its official candidate. But the NCNC national executive committee wished to sponsor Mr. J. Akande and prevailed upon the Egba secretariat also to back Akande's candidacy. A vigorous debate ensued in the Egba NCNC between Mrs. Ransome-Kuti's promoters and those of Akande. Infuriated when the NCNC refused to sponsor her as an official party candidate, she stood the election as an independent. With Mrs. Ransome-Kuti's decision to run as an independent and the consequent splintering of the NCNC supporters, neither she nor Akande stood a chance of winning. The NCNC lost the election and Mrs. Ransome-Kuti was expelled from the NCNC. But the election inspired her to found an independent political party to support her candidacy. The party was called the Commoners' People's Party (CPP). The Party lasted only a little over a year; its symbol was the lion of Egbaland.

However, without the support of the Egba women who instead followed one or the other of the two dominant political figures, Mrs. Ransome-Kuti could not succeed as a political figure. Her charisma was predicated on an involvement in Egba society, without which she was not politically effective. Community-based political power is not easily extended to the national scene. By 1960, Egba women were no longer united by a consciousness of common victimisation. The differences between the elite and market women were much sharper and the dominant loyalty was to party, not gender. No individual man or woman could possess political power in Nigeria outside the three main political parties of the time. Once Mrs. Ransome-Kuti left the party ranks, she was completely isolated from political influence. She retained only a moral influence and became one of the few public figures not lost in the wilderness of partisan politics.

In 1966, the Nigerian armed forces took over the government of Nigeria and all party politics were proscribed. Nonetheless, Mrs. Kuti continued to speak out on a number of public issues. During the civil war, she appealed to the leaders on both sides to call a truce.

Her son, Fela, has publicly and lyrically espoused his mother's beliefs in Nigerian nationalism and African socialism. He also satirised the military regime in his songs. This was fiercely resented by the military and there were a number of incidents involving Fela's troupe and soldiers. Indeed, it was during a confrontation between Fela and military authorities in Lagos in 1977 that Mrs. Ransome-Kuti, who was staying

with Fela, received injuries which precipitated a stroke, from which she never recovered.

Mrs. Kuti died on April 13, 1978, and was buried in Abeokuta on May 5, 1978. The funeral was a very grand affair, attended by many thousands of people. The markets in Abeokuta were closed as all the market women turned out to pay their last homage to "their king" to quote from one of the many praise songs which the Abeokuta women composed in her honour in 1948.

"Your life is beneficial to us Olufunmilayo.

Your life is beneficial to us.

Bẹẹrẹ (nickname of Mrs. Kuti) your honesty shall make you victorious over all enemies".

"When at last women taxation has failed,

it was Bẹẹrẹ that made life worth living;

Your tenure of office is pleasant for us,

You King, that makes life comfortable."

Mrs. Ransome-Kuti was admired and respected by Nigerians, both men and women, from all over the country. Even Nigerians abroad, such as the militant West African Students Union in Britain, wrote praising and supporting her. Perhaps the supreme compliment of love, trust, and admiration came from an Enugu woman who wrote to Mrs Ransome-Kuti in May, 1948: "Even the veiled children in their respective mothers' wombs, though inarticulate, nod approval of your deeds."

Lady Oyinkan Abayomi

Cheryl Johnson-Odim



The story of women's activism in Nigeria is only beginning to be told, though there is now a large contingent of those in the process of telling it and an even larger number of willing listeners. But there are those women who, even before the relatively recent spate of publications on women, were already well known among a large section of the populace. Lady Oyinkan Abayomi is one such woman.

Lady Abayomi's story is not just her own for at least three reasons. First, she lived a long life which spanned some of the most important changes in twentieth century Nigeria, especially for its women. Secondly, in many senses her life represents the activism of those women who straddled both the 'traditional' and the 'new', both the indigenous and the foreign. Though often much acculturated in western ways these women also maintained an allegiance to their own culture. Some were more radical in their thinking than Abayomi, others more conservative. She represents that middle strand who while sometimes opting for slower and less radical change, was a thorn in the side of those who defined women as less equal than men or those who wished to limit women's achievements to the hearth and home. While embracing certain 'Victorian' ideals of proper behaviour for women, by her own life's work Abayomi exemplified a social activism which challenged restrictions on the education, and civic and political involvement of women. And thirdly, through the number of lives she influenced, particularly in her educational and civic work, many saw in her example a new activist role in which women were individuals taking responsibility for their own lives as well as the life of the community.

Oyinkan Abayomi was born in Lagos on March 6, 1897 at her family home on what was then Victoria Street. Born into an upper middle class family of devout Anglicans, her earlier ancestry was equally privileged.

Her parents, Sir Kitoyi Ajasa and Lady Lucretia Cornelia Olayinka Ajasa, were both from elite Christianized families. Lady Ajasa's family was from Ijemo, Abeokuta, where she was born on May 1, 1875. She received formal western education, among a privileged few girls to do so at that time. She attended St. Peter's School Ake Abeokuta and the CMS Female Institution in Lagos. In 1893 she went to England where she studied at Wilton House School, Reading. She was an accomplished guitarist and would later be involved in a number of civic activities. In 1895 she returned to Lagos and in 1896 married Sir. Kitoyi Ajasa

(knighted in 1929), a well known lawyer whose family had migrated from Dahomey (now the Republic of Benin) to Lagos. He was also a member of the early Christian elite in Lagos and was on quite friendly terms with Governor Lugard. Regarded by many of the early African nationalists as politically moderate if not conservative, Ajasa was also a journalist and politically active. In 1905 he was appointed a member of the first Nigerian Legislative Council, a body in which an African member had little power, but much prestige. In the first decade of the twentieth century he founded one newspaper, *The Standard*, and in 1914 founded another, *The Nigerian Pioneer*. On September 7, 1917, Ajasa wrote in *The Nigerian Pioneer* that 'We in West Africa have been for generations under British rule and with the rule we are satisfied.' One week later he would seem to contradict himself when on September 14, 1917 he wrote in the same newspaper that the pressure of 'educated natives' for greater participation in government 'must be heeded someday'. Along with his wife and many others of this early Christianized elite, Ajasa often held an ambivalent position towards colonial rule. On the one hand they were anxious to take advantage of such things as western education, and often emulated the British in dress and manners. On the other hand, they keenly felt the slight of not being in control of their own destinies due to colonialism, while also struggling with their desire to recognize the worth of their own culture and of themselves as Africans. These were Oyinkan Abayomi's parents and this was the circle in which she grew up in Lagos. There is no doubt that it had a tremendous influence on her development.

Besides Oyinkan, the Ajasas had another child, a son, but he died in infancy. Though she thereafter became the only child of her parents there were many children, relatives and non-relatives who lived in her household. Thus she was part of an extended family situation in which she became accustomed to considering others, getting along with and taking responsibility for herself and others. Her childhood home was a central meeting place for many of the "movers and shakers" of early twentieth century Lagos, and she was constantly exposed to the hustle and bustle of political and social life.

It is interesting, given her parents' background, that Abayomi was given no Christian names. It is unclear why this was so. Nevertheless she grew up in a comfortable upper-middle class Christian home. She was baptized at St. Paul's Church, Breadfruit, Lagos and attended the church related CMS Girl's Seminary. Upon completion of her primary education, the Ajasa decided to send their daughter to England to study further. They themselves had both studied in England and presumably wanted the young Oyinkan to have that experience. In 1909 she sailed to England to study at Rhyfydd Hall College, Gloucestershire. This school may have been chosen because its principal, Mrs. Dempsey Kimmins, had gone to school with Abayomi's mother in Reading many years before. In 1976 Abayomi confessed to this author that she seriously considered studying medicine but did not think she could 'bear operations in the theatre'. She

also recalled with relish being a great hockey player in the position of centre half-back. In any case, the institution she attended was more geared to a 'finishing' school than an academic curriculum. Like her mother, however, she loved the study of music and after leaving Rhyford Hall she studied at the Royal Academy in London and earned a diploma at the Associated London College of Music.

Although Abayomi spent the World War I years in England there is little indication of any effect it may have had on her politically. There is more reason to suspect that her years in England were an extension of the privileged status she had had in Lagos. While there, she did, however, become involved in what would be a life-long civic pursuit, the Girl Guides Movement. When she returned to Lagos in 1920 the Girl Guides Movement in Nigeria was one year old and Abayomi became involved almost immediately. Her involvement with the Girl Guides was an example of what she later recalled as a guiding principle of her life, the desire to see women have equal opportunity with men. Though her childhood, upbringing and even later education had prepared her to be a 'proper' early twentieth century 'lady', her exposure to the politics of early twentieth century Lagos in her home and the political and civic pursuits of her parents had also prepared her to be an activist involved in her community. She devoted her life to the development and expansion of the Girl Guides movement in Nigeria, and was among the early pioneers who fought to have the Girl Guides funded by the government at a comparable level to the funding of the Boy Scouts. For many years Abayomi was the only Nigerian member of the governing body of the Girl Guides. She was a moving force behind Nigeria's admission into the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts. Gradually she worked her way up in the ranks of the organization in Nigeria. She served on the Central Nigerian Executive Committee of the Girl Guides and in 1925 became the first Nigerian Guide Captain. In 1949 she became Deputy Commissioner of the Nigerian Girl Guides, and in 1951 the first Nigerian Chief Guide Commissioner. In 1982 she was elected honorary life president of the Nigerian Guides Association.

Contemporaneously with her activity on behalf of the Girl Guides, Abayomi was involved in a number of other endeavours of both a public and personal nature. In 1920 when she returned after eleven and a half years in England, there were a number of new currents afoot.

Almost immediately, Abayomi became involved in educational and charitable activity. She took a job as a music instructor at her alma mater, the CMS Girls' School. She also began driving a car which was a present from her parents on her return home. In the same year as her return from England she founded the British West African Educated Girl's Club (BWAEGC). Small and extremely elite, this organization did little more than host parties and other activities to raise money for various charities. But it was the seed for what would become in due time the full-blown civic activities of Abayomi. Within a few years the BWAEGC reconstituted

itself as the Ladies Progressive Club (LPC). Along with its reorganization and new name came a more public profile, and in fact, political purposes. In particular, the LPC was to take up the cause of furthering women's education.

In the early nineteen-twenties, Lagos there was both national and international support for the improvement of female education. In 1920 the Phelps-Stokes Fund, an educational foundation based in the United States, sent an educational commission of inquiry to West Africa. The foundation's main interest was the promotion of the education of black people in both the United States and Africa. Nigeria was of course a major country on its agenda. In 1922 it published its findings in a voluminous report titled *Education in Africa*. Among its major recommendations was the urgent need to direct attention to female education. Locally, Charlotte Obasa, another woman activist of the early Christianized African elite, had founded with several other Nigerian women the Lagos Women's League. Among the many interests of the league was the establishment of schools for female education.

By 1923 the LPC began offering free literacy classes for market women and agitating for expanded educational facilities for girls. Shortly, thereafter they were able to recruit the wife of the governor, Lady Clifford, to their cause.

At this time, the two major institutions for girls' education were missionary; the CMS Girls' School and the Methodist Girls' High School. Neither offered an academic education, concentrating more on subjects such as domestic science, embroidery and sewing. Both the availability and the quality of girls' education lagged behind that of boys. This new agitation for female education was not only interested in expansion and improvement of girls' education, but also in getting government to take direct responsibility rather than merely allocating grants-in-aid to mission schools, which was the practice. By 1925 the government seem to have been somewhat on the defensive and issued a statement on female education which said in part 'The education of girls and women is an integral element in the whole educational system and presents many difficult problems'.

The LPC (along with other Lagos women's organizations) began organizing fund-raising activities aimed at the establishment of a new non-denominational girls' secondary education facility in Lagos. Finally in 1927, the first government secondary school for girls was founded, shortly thereafter named Queens College. The LPC had collected £715 by its own efforts and the money was held in an account listed as the Lagos Ladies Fund. Abayomi wrote a letter to the Government requesting that the money be used to establish a scholarship fund for Anglican girls who wished to attend the school. Her proposal was accepted and she was appointed a member of the board which administered the fund. Though the college taught the traditional 'home-making skills' of embroidery and hygiene, it also developed a full academic curriculum including English,

mathematics, history and geography. Music, drama and physical education was also taught. Later, science and foreign languages were added. If parents requested it, a student would be exempted from Bible study. This was an important conciliation that only a non-denominational publicly-supported school would be likely to make. Abayomi had a high profile in the establishment of the college and she was invited as the only Nigerian to serve on the school's inaugural staff. She taught music, drama, physical education and supervised sports teams. She and her parents were also members of the first advisory board of the college. Abayomi became very involved with the young pupils and served as headmistress of one of the school's boarding houses, Queen Victoria House. In addition, she took on the responsibility of boarding a number of young pupils, boys and girls of all religions who attended various schools in Lagos, in her own home, as her mother had done. Over the years many pupils passed through her home as boarders and on the occasion of her ninetieth birthday several of these former boarders donated books to Queen's College (to comprise an honorary library within the school library) to memorialize Abayomi's contributions to education.

In the midst of all this, Abayomi's personal life underwent serious changes. She met and married her first husband, a young Lagosian lawyer, Moronfolu Abayomi. Like his young wife, he had studied in England where he qualified to practice law. They were married May 10, 1923 at a huge ceremony at St. Paul's Church Breadfruit, Lagos, But only months after the marriage tragedy struck. Moronfolu Abayomi was shot dead (while at court) in August of 1923. Up to this time Oyinkan Abayomi seemed to have led a charmed life, but she was now faced with the harsh realities of life. There is a proverb which says 'that which does not kill us makes us stronger'. With tremendous support from her family and friends and after taking time off from her teaching career, she made her life busy once again with the civic and educational pursuits described above. So it was after this tragedy that she accomplished much, especially on behalf of the Girl Guides and Queen's College.

Abayomi eventually got married again in 1930, to a medical doctor, Kofoworola Abayomi. He was knighted in 1951 and became Sir Abayomi. He was well-connected to both the traditional and new elite, being distantly related to one of the ruling families in Oyo and later holding several traditional chieftaincy titles, including Onashokun of Oyo and Baba 'Sale of Lagos. Sir Abayomi studied medicine in Scotland and specialized in ophthalmology. They had a long productive life together until he died of natural causes in January 1979.

Nineteen-thirties Lagos, as with much of West Africa in the inter-war period, experienced the development of an earnest nationalist movement. Though there had been several associations of varying degrees of political involvement and nationalism, such as the People's Union, the Anti-Slavery and Aborigines Protection Society and the Reform Club (of which Abayomi's father Sir Kitoyi Ajasa had been a founding member), the

formation of the Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP) in 1923 by Herbert Macaulay signalled the first major development of a western style political party. In the same year another smaller political association was founded, the Union of Young Nigerians, but the NNDP dominated the Lagosian political scene. During this time Kofoworola Abayomi was studying in Scotland. About four years after his return and after his marriage to Oyinkan Abayomi he was intimately involved with the founding of another major political party, the first to test the NNDP's hegemony in Lagos politics, the Lagos Youth Movement (LYM), founded in 1934. Within a few years the LYM became the Nigerian Youth Movement (NYM) and Kofoworola Abayomi served as its president. The goals of the NYM as described in a *Daily Times* article (November 19, 1940), included 'a complete taking over of the government of Nigeria into the hands of the indigenous people of our country' and 'a removal of the existing condition [colonialism] so that Nigerians will run the administrative machinery of their fatherland'. In 1938 Kofoworola Abayomi was an NYM candidate for the Legislative Council, representing Lagos and was among the slate of NYM members who dealt the NNDP its first electoral defeat, in fifteen years. He was a nationalist who sought Nigerian independence from Britain and was actively involved in party politics toward that end.

Prior to this time, Oyinkan Abayomi had not been directly involved in nationalist politics and though her parents were civically and politically active she had not been raised in a home which espoused Nigerian independence. Yet, as a single woman (after only a few months of marriage) working independently, driving a car in Lagos of the nineteen twenties and having a high profile in struggling for equal treatment for women in the Girl Guides and for the establishment of Queens College, surely she had begun to develop her own political profile. While it might be easy to conclude she merely followed in her second husband's footsteps in her political activism in the period from 1934 until Nigerian Independence in 1960, it cannot be that simple. She had begun to translate her work on behalf of women's equal treatment and opportunity into her own political voice and being in the inner circle of one of the early nationalist movements — many early LYM and NYM meetings were held in the Abayomi home — provided avenues to transform that voice into political activism.

The LYM, as with all of the nationalist parties, actively recruited women members. Oyinkan Abayomi was an inaugural and active member. In 1935 she authored an article titled 'Modern Womanhood' in the NYM newspaper *The Service*. In it she exhorted women to participate in the processes which would shape their futures and cautioned them not to view matrimony as the sole 'career' to which they aspired or were destined. This was logic out of her own experience. She had married the first time at what would then have been considered a late age, and even more so the second time. Yet, before and in between marriages she had

hardly been idling time away waiting for a suitable husband. The article went on further to encourage women's involvement in improving female education. Addressing herself directly to women of her own socio-economic position she warned: 'The spirit of uppishness among the few privileged women who had been educated abroad must be killed. Unless the so-called highly educated make themselves open and approachable they will have no one to lead...' She ended by sounding a note for women's equality by proclaiming '...women also should be given free chances to develop their faculties for the benefit of the race.'

When the LYM became the NYM it organized a Ladies' Section whose leadership fell to Oyinkan Abayomi in whose home their meetings were often held. But the NYM was in constant competition with the NNDCP (and after 1944 with the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons — NCNC — founded in that year) for the allegiance of the Lagos market-women, who as several historians have acknowledged, provided a powerful base of support for the nationalist movement. As early as 1938 the NYM Ladies' Section came under criticism from the male leadership of the party for not making greater progress in organizing women, particularly the market-women. But despite its recruitment of women and the existence of its Ladies' Section, the NYM, as with all the nationalist parties of the nineteen-forties, had no women on its Executive Committee or in other policy-making positions. It is unknown what personal discussions between Kofoworola and Oyinkan Abayomi took place on this issue, but this author was informed by Lady Abayomi that while it was her own idea she received support from her husband in her next step of forming an all-female organization.

After ten years of involvement with women members of the LYM/NYM, Oyinkan Abayomi decided to form a separate association, the Nigerian Women's Party (NWP). The NWP was not envisioned as being in political competition with the NYM, in any case women could not yet vote when the NWP was founded. Also, many NWP members remained active NYM members. Moreover, the NWP does not appear to have taken a strictly nationalist position, for instance, it never directly called for an independent Nigeria but rather concentrated on improving the position of women. While the leadership of the NWP, including Oyinkan Abayomi, believed that colonialism would eventually come to an end, they never raised that as an issue in party activity and in fact sought more to make the colonial situation improve itself rather than to bring an end to it. Nevertheless, the NWP's founding and activities were auspicious for their time.

On May 10, 1944, in Oyinkan Abayomi's home at 18 Broad Street, Lagos, about a dozen women gathered. They presented their views on the need for a separate women's organization and resolved to form one. This was the inaugural meeting of the Nigerian's Women's Party. Abayomi later recalled to this author that she gathered the women together to form the party because 'women were being cheated by our men and the

government' and that she told the founding members 'we must as women demand our rights'. The constitution of the party stated its aims and objectives.

The Women's Party makes its strongest appeal to the women of Nigeria irrespective of class or any other distinction, reminding them of their backward and unenviable position among the women of other races and calling them to action. It appeals to those who may be outside the ranks of the Women's Party for sympathy and cooperation.

The motto; 'Aim High' was adopted and membership was to be limited to female adult natives of Nigeria and women of African descent domiciled in Nigeria. On becoming a member a woman had to take an oath. The member was to stand and after being handed a glass of water, repeat: 'Take this and drink it in remembrance of your oath, and as often as you drink water may you remember your obligation to this Party, and may you remain loyal to it'. A member could be expelled for 'treachery or disloyalty'.

An executive committee was established composed of a president, vice-president, two secretaries, a legal adviser, two treasurers and seven unofficial members elected from the general membership. One of the duties of the legal adviser was: 'To study closely all government bills and other measures affecting the people, irrespective of class or any other designation...'

The day following the party's inaugural meeting the *Daily Service* newspaper carried an article in which Oyinkan Abayomi was quoted as saying that the women of Nigeria '...have been neglected politically, socially and economically ... despite the fact that a large number of women are house-owners, they have no representation in the Town Council and no consideration has been given to provide them with seats on the Legislative Council'.

Within weeks of voicing her criticism Oyinkan Abayomi was appointed to the Lagos Town Council where she served for six years. Mrs Tinuola Dedeke, secretary of the NWP, was also quoted: 'Women should cast away all feelings of religious and tribal differences and present a united front for the sake of their motherland'. The ideology of attempting to recruit and represent women of all ethnicities, classes and religions was to be a cardinal principle of the NWP, and it was Oyinkan Abayomi's own personal philosophy as well.

Reaction to formation of the NWP was mixed. The NYM initially expressed surprise and questioned how politically effective an all-female organization could be. Later, apparently recognizing the determination of the NWP to exist (and perhaps in self-interest given that high-profile members of the NWP were also NYM members) the NYM took a more favourable stance and its newspaper the *Daily Service* often publicized the NWP activities.

One month after the birth of the NWP, Herbert Macaulay, founder of the NNDP and often referred to as the 'father of Nigerian nationalism', was highly critical of the NWP's formation and especially of Abayomi's appointment to the Lagos Town Council. This may have reflected his initial fears that the NWP would draw away market-women members of his NNDP.

There was also some criticism from various groups of market-women. The NWP would never, in fact, wield the influence among the market-women that Madam Alimotu Pelewura, head of the Lagos Market-women's Association and staunch ally of Herbert Macaulay, did.

Still, the NWP attempted to cooperate with and recruit the market-women. At a fourth anniversary celebration of the NWP the *Daily Service* quoted Abayomi who proclaimed: 'To the market-women in general I owe a great debt of gratitude for their steadfastness, great support and cooperation'. This seems to have been more than wishful thinking as earlier, none other than Madam Pelewura had remarked that Abayomi had 'won the admiration of all women'. In addition, one prominent member of the market leadership, *Iyalode* Rabiatsu, *Alaso Oke*, was a vice-president of the NWP. In 1945 when Rabiatsu was made a chief in her home town of Ado Ewi, the NWP gave her a large reception at Glover Memorial Hall. On that day a procession of NWP members led by Abayomi paraded amidst drumming and dancing from the Abayomi home to the Hall.

There was, however, at least one major disagreement between the NWP and the market-women. This occurred in 1947 when Mrs Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti (see chapter on Ransome-Kuti) well-known head of the Abeokuta Women's Union, while in London with the NCNC delegation to oppose the Richards Constitution made negative remarks about the status of Nigerian women. Since the NWP itself had been founded on the principle that, as Abayomi stated, 'women were being cheated by our men and the government', what seemed to be at work in the NWP's disparagement of Ransome-Kuti's remarks was a class dynamic. That is, many NWP members were embarrassed by Ransome-Kuti's 'laundering of dirty linen' in an international forum. Though they may have agreed with her essential point of the inequality of women in Nigeria, they probably felt Ransome-Kuti's presentation, which pointedly condemned the role colonialism played in Nigerian women's oppression, went too far. The market-women disagreed, however and rallied solidly behind Ransome-Kuti, leaving a small, middle-class core of the NWP, led by Abayomi, as lonely dissenters.

Estimated general numerical strength of the NWP, ranging from 500 to 2,000 was small compared to the 3,000-10,000 women estimated to be members of the Lagos Market-Women's Association. Yet, the NWP was very active between its founding in 1944 and its gradual demise by the mid-nineteen fifties. Though the Abayomi home served as the initial meeting place for the party, as its ranks grew meetings were held in St.

Peter's Church school room in Lagos. The NWP made a number of unsuccessful attempts to establish branches outside Lagos, but its activities were effectively confined to Lagos where, it was always led by Oyinkan Abayomi. It conducted free adult literacy classes in the evenings at the CMS Grammar School and sent many delegations to the Colonial Secretary and other government officers to agitate for more vocational schools for girls, vocational training centres for adult women and merit scholarships for girls. It campaigned for women's admission to the police force and protested discrimination against African nurses in favour of European nurses. The NWP also campaigned for improvement in health care, particularly pre-natal and pediatric services. Notably, given that the overwhelming majority of the leadership were Christian, it also criticized the number of scholarships awarded to Muslim girls. In a letter to the Assistant Director of Education, signed by Oyinkan Abayomi and Tinuola Dedeke, the NWP protested that the few existing government schools only observed Christian holidays and suggested 'The Mohammedan Festivals Holiday is just as important hence every assisted school by the government [sic] should observe it'.

The NWP also joined with the market-women in opposition to the price-control schemes which the colonial government enacted during the nineteen-forties. NWP members were aware of other international currents during the same period. As a restrictive measure against juvenile hawkers the government sent social welfare officers to meet incoming trains and remove young girls and boys under the age of sixteen who appeared to come to Lagos from the provinces to trade. While favouring that young children should be in school, the NWP felt that restrictions against child hawkers were culturally unenforceable, and that there might be an even more sinister population control mechanism at work. In August 1946, after several incidents of this kind, Oyinkan Abayomi led a delegation to the office of the Acting Director of the Colony which presented a petition against the searching for and removal of young girls from incoming trains. The petition also expressed that 'we hope this restriction of movement is not a subtle way of introducing the pass system which obtains in South Africa'.

The NWP vociferously supported the enfranchisement of women (including women in the North) and their representation on political committees. The first year in which Lagos women were enfranchised, 1950, it fielded candidates, Oyinkan Abayomi and Tinuola Dedeke, allied with the Area Councils for seats on the Lagos Town Council. Neither was successful. The NWP was definitely on the wane.

By 1950 Obafemi Awolowo had founded the Action Group (AG) in Ibadan and it was destined to be a major nationalist party, particularly in the western region of the country. The AG began to absorb much of the NYM membership. Oyinkan Abayomi's name, along with that of her husband, was among the first fifteen names listed in the membership book of the Lagos branch of the Action Group. By 1952 colonial govern-

ment records were referring to the NWP as an 'Action Group supporting body'. Though the NWP lingered a few years longer, it had no effective existence separate from that of the Action Group. Still, Abayomi's vision of the struggle for women's equality had been translated into action. Other women dedicated to the same principle followed in her footsteps.

Though the NWP was completely moribund by the mid nineteen-fifties, Oyinkan Abayomi was still very much a public persona. In 1955 she was the second woman to be appointed to the Western House of Assembly by the Lieutenant Governor. She was appointed as a special member representing women's interests and served for a year until the 1956 elections.

In 1959 the National Council of Women's Societies was founded in Ibadan. The group was intended to act as an umbrella organization of women's associations which worked for equal opportunity for women. In 1960, Oyinkan Abayomi became head of the Lagos branch. Under her leadership the Lagos branch was notable for its non-partisan membership which included women activists of the two rival political parties the AG and the NCNC. The branch also made attempts to extend its membership to the market-women as well as the elite. One of the first public actions of the Lagos branch was to protest the dismissal of an expatriate pediatrician who had criticized health policies of the government. It also demanded better maternal and child health care and continued to work on behalf of one of the Abayomi's cherished causes, women's education.

In 1945, she received the award of an MBE for her work with the Girl Guides. During the next twenty years Abayomi acquired several honours. After her husband was knighted in 1951 she became Lady Abayomi. In 1954 she received her first traditional title when the Alake of Abeokuta bestowed the title of *Lika of Ijemo* on her. Subsequently she also became *Yeye Sikalu of Ado-Ekiti*, *Moroye of Lagos*, *Iya Eko*, *Iya Abiye of Egbaland* and on her 90th birthday, *Yeye Niwura (Mother is Gold) of Ife*. She was also honoured with the award of an OFR (Order of the Officer of the Federal Republic of Nigeria) for her civic contributions to the nation. Lady Abayomi continued to be active after the emergence of an independent Nigeria, though the first military coup d'état in 1966 followed closely by the civil war effectively strangled much independent political or even social welfare activity, at least on a mass scale. Yet she remained alert and well-known despite her advancing age.

On the 19th of March, 1990 Lady Abayomi died at the ripe old age of 93. Her death made front page headlines in most Nigerian newspapers of March 21, 1990. The funeral service in Christ Church Cathedral Lagos was a very grand occasion attended by many Yoruba traditional rulers, top government officials and innumerable dignitaries. In tribute to her memory the Lagos State Government renamed one of the prestigious streets in Lagos, *Queen's Drive*, *Ikoyi* after her. It thus became *Oyinkan Abayomi Drive*. This was a most fitting accolade for the 'Lady' who had truly been the *Queen of Lagos*.

In the uncovering of the lives of individuals we sew another patch into

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the quilt of the past, better enabling us to understand it. The true gift of history, of course, is being able to better comprehend the present. The life of Lady Oyinkan Abayomi is another window to the great variety of roles which women in Nigeria have played in the shaping of their nation and people, and therefore an inspiration to the women of the present.

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By the skilful blending of essentially primary sources such as oral traditions, personal interviews and occasional written evidence—... the contributors to this volume have attempted to analyse the kinds of contribution which women have made to the Nigerian society in the past. The studies of these famous women raise issues which are pertinent to the development of Nigeria and the effective participation of women therein. An examination of women's activities in historical perspective therefore provides one useful avenue for an understanding of the possibilities of their involvement in modern development."

—BOLANLE AWE

These illuminating essays are written by some of Nigeria's best-known historians and writers on women. A useful reference book on women's studies and an accessible guide to the general reader.

