

“We Beg to be Under the White Men”? Non-elite Nigerian Women’s Expectations of Independence

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ABSTRACTS

With the achievement of flag independence in 1960, Nigeria’s political question was considered resolved. The question is: to what extent were other questions resolved? Kelly has posited that gender complicates how periodisation in history functions, as “significant turning points” impacted each sex differently. Decolonisation in Nigeria faced a similar crisis. In line with this thinking, this article interrogates the case for colonial non-elite women by asking new questions of old actors during the late colonial era of decolonisation. What did these women expect from independence? Did their visions of freedom align with those espoused by the local educated elite and newly constituted political elite? This article interrogates these related questions through a local newspaper, the *West African Pilot*, owned by the Nigerian nationalist and later Premier of the Eastern Region of Nigeria that achieved internal self-government in 1957. It demonstrates how historians can interrogate events that circumvent official documents and personal accounts. By interrogating the expectations of independence of a subgroup, this article makes two scholarly interventions – spotlighting non-elite women in protests that transcend nationalism, and showcasing newspapers as a critical source for writing non-elite history.

Mit der Erlangung der Flaggenunabhängigkeit im Jahr 1960 galt die politische Frage Nigerias als gelöst. Aber: Inwieweit wurden andere Fragen gelöst? Kelly hat postuliert, dass *gender* die Periodisierung in der Geschichte erschwert, da „bedeutende Wendepunkte“ jedes *gender* unterschiedlich beeinflussten. Die Dekolonialisierung in Nigeria stand vor einer ähnlichen Krise. So

* I am grateful for the indepth feedback provided by Adam Jones, Mariam Goshadze and Enrico Ille at the Polenzer Verein Einigkeit 4/University of Leipzig African History and Culture workshop on a previous draft of this paper. I am also thankful to BIGSAS, University of Bayreuth for their support to attend the ECAS 2023 conference from which this article originates.

hinterfragt dieser Artikel die Situation kolonialer Nicht-Elitefrauen, indem er neue Fragen an alte Akteure während der späten Kolonialära der Dekolonisierung stellt. Was erwarteten diese Frauen von der Unabhängigkeit? Stimmt ihre Vorstellungen von Freiheit mit denen der lokalen gebildeten Elite und der neu konstituierten politischen Elite überein? In diesem Artikel werden diese damit verbundenen Fragen anhand einer Lokalzeitung, des *West African Pilot*, untersucht, die dem nigerianischen Nationalisten und späteren Ministerpräsidenten der östlichen Region Nigerias gehörte, die 1957 ihre interne Selbstverwaltung erlangte. Er zeigt, wie Historiker Ereignisse untersuchen können, die offizielle Dokumente umgehen und persönliche Erzählungen. Indem dieser Artikel die Unabhängigkeitserwartungen einer Untergruppe hinterfragt, unternimmt dieser Artikel zwei wissenschaftliche Interventionen: Er beleuchtet Nicht-Elite-Frauen bei Protesten, die über den Nationalismus hinausgehen, und stellt Zeitungen als entscheidende Quelle für das Schreiben von Nicht-Elite-Geschichte heraus.

[...] if you want to understand the present in order to direct the future, you will have to grasp not only what great men did and how common men lived, but also what all men hoped for.¹

[F]or some, the end of empire meant that impoverished and oppressed people could share in the universal good, could aspire to a generally defined minimum standard of living, could insist on certain rights, as workers, as citizens, as women, as individuals.²

In January 1958, the Eastern Region government in the British colony Nigeria proposed to reverse a provision of its 1957 ambitious free Universal Primary Education (UPE) scheme, inspired by a similar programme kick-started by the Western Region in January 1955. The Nnamdi Azikiwe-led National Council for Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC) government attempted to outpace the development of its regional counterpart led by Action Group (AG) Western Region premier Obafemi Awolowo. However, the Eastern Region administration encountered financial difficulties soon after due to unrealistic financial planning. By the end of 1957, its expenditure on education alone had consumed 42 per cent of regular revenues, while the UPE scheme was gulping £4 million. At this rate, the regional government was hurtling towards bankruptcy. Azikiwe's government was forced to adopt a moderate approach to its programme. As also documented by Fafunwa from the 1962 findings of a committee assembled to review the scheme in 1958, the government would have had to dedicate its entire annual budget to introduce a free primary education scheme.³

The Eastern Region government's reversal sparked protests across the region in what was called the Education Riots of 1958. These riots, mainly instigated by women, claimed

1 Quoted in M. Okoye, A Letter to Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe: A Dissent Remembered, Enugu 1979, p. xii.

2 F. Cooper, The Dialectics of Decolonization: Nationalism and Labor Movements in Postwar French Africa, in: F. Cooper and A. L. Stoler (eds.), Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World, Berkeley CA 1997, pp. 406–407.

3 Cited in A. B. Fafunwa, History of Education in Nigeria, 2nd ed., London 1975, p. 172.

property and lives for over a month. The women purportedly chanted "No More Black Man Rule" and "White Man Don't Go" as they demonstrated. Calm returned following the declaration of a state of emergency in the region. At first sight, the women's protest demonstrated opposition to ending colonialism. However, by this time, Nigerians were already in majority control of governance, which exposed the tensions between the nationalist movement and other social movements working toward personal ends in the late colonial period. Thus, as Frederick Cooper has argued, to fuse all forms of opposition to colonialism into a narrative of "growing nationalist sentiment and nationalist organization"⁴ does little to further our understanding of the process, as this practice subsumes competing group interests under national struggle.

For a long time, decolonisation studies have focused on Western-educated elite-led-nationalist movements in ending foreign rule in Africa and downplayed internal tensions.⁵ This focus meant that gender considerations,⁶ and clashes between political projects and social projects, remained underexplored.⁷ When Nigeria's Eastern and Western Regions achieved internal self-government with majority indigenous rule in 1957, political independence was set. Nonetheless, several economic and social questions remained unresolved for the masses, who experienced colonialism and its end unevenly. This article reveals the tensions that accompanied the end of foreign rule by examining the expectations of independence of non-literate women not at the forefront of political handovers, living in the Eastern Region of Nigeria under internal self-government since 8 August 1957. By interrogating their expectations using newspapers, this article makes two main scholarly interventions – spotlighting ordinary women, and showcasing newspapers as a critical source for non-elite history. While public protests that transcend anti-colonialism is an associated angle in this article, it is not central to the argument.⁸

1. Uncovering Silenced Histories of Non-elite Colonial Women

The realisation of the radical potential of women's history comes in the writing of histories that focus on women's experiences and analyze the ways in which politics construct gender and gender constructs politics. Feminist history then becomes not the recount-

4 F. Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History*, Berkeley CA 2005, p. 18.

5 F. Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa*, Cambridge 1996, pp. 6–7.

6 M. E. Wiesner-Hanks, *Gender in History: Global Perspectives*, 2nd ed., Malden 2011, p. 160.

7 Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society*, p. 5.

8 For insights into colonial women's protests in this regard, see G. Chuku, *Navigating the Colonial Terrain through Protest Movements: A Discourse on the Nigerian Women's Motives*, in: T. Falola, S. M. Hassan and D. C. Ohadike (eds), *Power and Nationalism in Modern Africa: Essays in Honor of Don Ohadike*, Durham NC 2008, pp. 169–186; S. M. Martin, *Palm Oil and Protest: An Economic History of the Ngwa Region, South-Eastern Nigeria, 1800–1980*, Cambridge 1988; N. Edeagu, *Critiquing Witness Testimonies in African Colonial History: A Study of the Women's War of 1929*, in: *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 26 (2017), pp. 40–64, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/48562078>; J. A. Byfield, *Feeding the Troops: Abeokuta (Nigeria) and World War II*, in: *African Economic History* 35 (2007), pp. 77–87, <https://doi.org/10.2307/25427035>.

ing of great deeds performed by women but the exposure of the often silent and hidden operations of gender that are nonetheless present and defining forces in the organisation of most societies.⁹

In producing these new insights about women, scholars now make them “a focus of inquiry, a subject of the story, an agent of the narrative”.¹⁰ Therefore, “herstory” has provided, among other things, heroines and proof of women’s agency. At the same time, borrowing Coleman’s phraseology, women were not a “monolithic, like-minded, and similarly motivated” group.¹¹ There existed “differences within difference”.¹² The women in this article are described in general as the non-elite, alternatively known in the scholarly literature, notably as ordinary women, common women or average women.

As increasing attention has been paid to those considered on the margins of history when interrogating questions surrounding the end of colonial rule worldwide, women are no longer consigned to the footnotes of history. They now form the kernel of numerous historical narratives. Functioning in their own rights, they no longer stand as reactionaries to largely male orchestrated events as Lerner once described.¹³ However, the further into the colonial past scholars return to find this independence, the less likely it is to recover women in traditional historical sources. Despite this challenge, Uchendu and Kwaghe have condemned equating documentary silence with “historical passivity or, even worse, with historical insignificance”.¹⁴ Understandably, non-elite women appear sparsely in conventional records, since fewer written accounts about or by them exist. Elsewhere, they are conspicuous in statistics, as part of an account of a small group of literate men, or in the archives when documented as in conflict with the more powerful – the colonial state, traditional authorities, or church institutions.

Newspapers can establish the circumstances and conditions of non-elite women’s lives during the colonial period. Despite being a mediated and literate enterprise, they provide context and content surrounding their voices, presence, and actions during the period to bypass the male gaze and avoid androcentrism, elisions, or epistemic silencing. These written sources enable women’s reinsertion into scholarly narratives and amplify their actions as challengers and resisters to colonial state power. Notably, Nnamdi Azikiwe’s *West African Pilot* (hereafter *Pilot*) is remarkable for facilitating the formulation of an unconventional history of women’s encounters with state authority. The *Pilot* was exceptional in capturing the aspirations and desperations of colonial Nigerians from the late 1930s when it first appeared until Nigeria achieved flag independence on October 1, 1960.

9 J. W. Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, New York 1988, p. 27.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 15.

11 J. S. Coleman, *Nigeria: Background to Nationalism*, Berkeley CA 1958, p. 5.

12 J. W. Scott, *Women’s History*, in: P. Burke (ed.) *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, 2nd ed., University Park PA 2001, p. 57.

13 G. Lerner, *Placing Women in History: Definitions and Challenges*, in: *Feminist Studies* 3 (1975) 1/2, pp. 5–14.

14 Quoted in E. Uchendu and Z. E. Kwaghe, *Challenges of Writing African Women’s Histories*, in: O. Yacob-Haliso and T. Falola (eds), *The Palgrave Handbook of African Women’s Studies*, Cham 2019, pp. 1–16, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-77030-7_8-1.

On the path to this independence, disputations arose over the meaning of freedom. What it meant to be free from foreign rule held different notions. For the fractured minority Nigerian elite, freedom meant Britain relinquishing political power to them as the representatives of Nigerians. The educated elite – identified by their educational achievements – uniformly believed that education was central to “progress, happiness, and successful self-rule in Nigeria and in Africa as a whole”.¹⁵ Unremarkably, one of the criticisms they levied against colonial administrations was the heavy price paid by the few children fortunate enough to receive any education (in primary and secondary schools).¹⁶ Thus, for the majority of adult Nigerians groaning under the weight of various economic, social, and religious oppressions, freedom was more expansive. It included freedom from “unjust and incomprehensible laws and directives”, and later came to include education as fostering social mobility, which would ensure a better life for their children.¹⁷

2. The Politics of Education

The last decade of colonial rule was perhaps, as Fafunwa posited, “the most tempestuous political era in Nigerian history.”¹⁸ The devolution of power by the British colonial administration to Nigerians proceeded rapidly with new constitutions in 1951, 1954, and 1957. The Macpherson constitution of 1951 gave Nigeria its first taste of electoral politics through democratic elections into the regional assembly and houses of assembly. The constitution also empowered each region to raise and appropriate funds and enact education, health, agriculture, and local government laws. The 1957 Constitutional Conference debates finalised internal self-government for the three regions (Eastern, Northern, and Western). While the Eastern and Western Regions became autonomous in 1957, the Northern Region decided to wait until March 1959.

Regionalisation also instigated intense economic rivalry, as each party tried to outdo the other in providing social amenities for its area of jurisdiction. Backed by its wealth from cocoa exports, the AG-controlled Western Region first challenged the Eastern Region by issuing twenty-three economic papers in mid-1951 – the capstone being education. In January 1955, the Obafemi Awolowo-led Western Regional government launched its free UPE scheme of eight years for children between the ages of 5 and 13. The NCNC-led Eastern Regional government followed suit, not to be outdone, which it publicized as the unfailing path to prosperity and a rising standard of living for its inhabitants.¹⁹

15 P. S. Zachernuk, *Colonial Subjects: An African Intelligentsia and Atlantic Ideas*, Charlottesville VA 2000, p. 118.

16 See pamphlet by Amanke Okafor (co-written with a group of Nigerians in London) – *Why We Fight for Freedom*, 1949, p. 31, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries, Special Collections and University Archives, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers.

17 J. F. A. Ajayi, *Expectations of Independence*, in: *Daedalus* 111 (1982) 2, p. 5.

18 Fafunwa, *History of Education in Nigeria*, p. 167.

19 R. L. Tignor, *Capitalism and Nationalism at the End of the Empire: State and Business in Decolonizing Egypt, Nigeria, and Kenya, 1945–1963*, Princeton NJ 1998, p. 266.

In the fall of 1954, the government informed its local government authorities that it would introduce the free UPE scheme by 1956 and would provide grants to all the local government councils and voluntary associations to subsidise it: 5 per cent and 45 per cent respectively.²⁰

Education inevitably formed the cornerstone of the priorities for the Western and Eastern regional governments headed by the Action Group and the NCNC, respectively – unsurprisingly as the educated elite universally agreed that it was the key to progress. The Western-educated elite strongly advocated for all that concerned education: mass education schemes, adult education programmes, evening classes, expanding primary and secondary education, teacher training, and scholarship funding. However, this rivalry between the AG and the NCNC had an economic dimension of sizeable magnitude and grave long-term economic consequences.²¹ In particular, the Eastern Region government's attempt to cover all aspects of education – including establishing a university in the region, mainly funded by the annual allocation of half a million pounds from its Eastern Region Marketing Board²² – produced dire consequences. Stevenson revealed that the development of this university, the University of Nigeria, funded through educational tax expropriation, incited violent protests.²³ While the elite saw higher education as integral to development, the Eastern Region's inhabitants denounced the unequal distribution of resources to a university that would benefit only a fraction of them. As Stevenson rightly argued, the region's education scheme was not a product of consensus but one of extraction – a “University-by-fiat.”²⁴ Unremarkably, on behalf of the Onitsha people, Fanasi Mgbako addressed Azikiwe and K.O. Mbadiwe²⁵ concerning the people's disillusionment over the withdrawal of the UPE scheme. This action had sparked riots, led by women who challenged the legitimacy of what can be termed an indirect tax on their incomes. Mgbako urged Mbadiwe directly to do everything possible to restore this scheme as primary, and not university education, was a birth-right of every citizen.²⁶

In particular, Nigerian girls and women had been lagging behind their male counterparts throughout the colonial period in school education, owing to financial, filial, and familial

20 R. W. Stevenson, 'The University of the Village': The University of Nigeria, Nsukka and the Making of Post-Independence Nigeria, PhD dissertation, Michigan State University 2020, p. 156.

21 Tignor, *Capitalism and Nationalism*, p. 235.

22 U. K. Ukiwe, *The Establishment and Development of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, 1960–1970*, PhD dissertation, Southern Illinois University 1984, p. 55.

23 R. W. Stevenson, 'You Have your Say, We Have our Way': Women's Resistance and Educational Taxation in Late Colonial Nigeria, in: *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 57 (2023) 2, p. 2, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00083968.2022.2084126>.

24 Stevenson, 'The University of the Village', p. 140.

25 Mbadiwe was one of the most powerful politicians in Nigeria's federal government. He held three successive cabinet positions within it under the NCNC from January 1954: minister of lands, surveys, and natural resources (1954), minister of communications and aviation (1955) and minister of commerce and industry (1957) in the first all-Nigerian Federal Executive Council, headed by Prime Minister Alhaji Tafawa Balewa. See H. R. Lynch, K. O. Mbadiwe: *A Nigerian Political Biography, 1915–1990*, New York 2012, p. 119.

26 F. Mgbako, *Truth and Falsehood: Addresses of Welcome presented to Dr. K.O. Mbadiwe and Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe* (self-published, 1958?), pp. 8–12. Hoover Institution Library & Archives, Stanford University. Nigerian pamphlets and other publications collected by Simon Ottenberg, microform, Reel 15.

considerations. For adult women who were anxious to learn, the odds were against them. For instance, as revealed by Mrs. Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, a member of the NCNC and renowned educationist, women in the Abeokuta Province, Western Provinces (later part of the Western Region), spent most of their days working, with some starting in the early morning. At the end of an exhausting day, they could not learn "anything worthwhile". While the Abeokuta Women's Association that she led had started adult education centres in the province for them, they were closed down eventually because of irregular attendance.²⁷ The retrogressive state of female education was also highlighted by another member of the educated elite, Mrs. Oyinkan Abayomi, who named education as one of women's "greatest obstacles".²⁸ Access to education had become a function of class early on for girls and women in colonial Nigeria. Daughters of the educated elite class, like Mrs. Abayomi, born to Sir Kitoye Ajasa and Lady Lucretia Cornelia Olayinka Ajasa, could access Western education beyond the post-primary level either in Nigeria in the few existing institutions, or overseas where costs were prohibitive for the majority.²⁹ These privileged girls were not bogged down by economic or household responsibilities revolving around aiding their mothers in trading, caring for younger siblings or cleaning and cooking.³⁰ While advanced education did not guarantee jobs to young girls and women, the school fees was an additional stumbling block in the way of women's social advancement.

3. Mothers, Schooling and Indirect Taxation

In early nineteenth-century Nigeria, Western-style school education was already a powerful mechanism for social advancement for the traditionally excluded members of society. While people were still sceptical about Christian-cum-Western education in the 1840s and 1850s, by the turn of the century, they had come to realise elementary education opened the doors to coveted and profitable vocations such as clerical work, teaching, evangelising, or public letter writing.³¹ Mothers more clearly understood the advantages of education than fathers, who highly suspected the missionaries' intentions. Several autobiographies show that mothers more accurately assessed the immediate and future benefits of Western education and were more willing to support or sponsor their children's schooling. Notably, Nnamdi Azikiwe's grandfather had objected to his father (Obed Azikiwe) gaining missionary education since it would deplete his farming labour force. While he expressly forbade a strong boy like his son to waste his time "absorb-

27 Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, *The Plight of Nigerian Women*, undated. The National Archives Kew, CO 583/293/1.

28 Nigeria Women's Party Meets Oshogbo Women in Town Hall, in: WAP, 30 March 1946, pp. 1 & 4.

29 Mrs. Abayomi attended Rhyford Hall College in Gloucestershire, England. For more on her exceptional background, see C. Johnson-Odim, *Lady Oyinkan Abayomi*, in: B. Awe (ed.), *Nigerian Women in Historical Perspective*, Ibadan 1992, pp. 152–154.

30 For the case of 1930s colonial Lagos, see A. A. George, *Making Modern Girls: A History of Girlhood, Labor, and Social Development in Colonial Lagos*, Athens OH 2014, p. 35.

31 Fafunwa, *History of Education in Nigeria*, p. 112.

ing the nonsense of the white man”, the sly interventions of Obed’s staunch Christian mother enabled Azikiwe’s father to obtain a Western education.³²

This education was neither free nor compulsory until the launch of UPE schemes in the 1950s. Rising education costs had implied that social advancement through education was limited to self-sponsorship, scholarships, or those funded by wealthy parents, or families or communities ready to make the heavy personal and financial sacrifices. Taxation was an additional consideration, particularly for male students. As early as 1928, the colonial government pondered the taxation of schoolboys over 16. The Director of Education, E. R. J. Hussey, refused to exempt students still in elementary school or a school section since they should have finished school by 16.³³ Unlike their British counterparts, most pupils commenced school later in life. Thus, if they had to pay taxes when they turned sixteen while still in school, they would likely abandon their studies.³⁴ While Azikiwe generally welcomed taxation,³⁵ his newspaper editors frequently condemned student taxation.³⁶ One editor argued that since school boys lacked income, they could not be asked to pay income tax. Moreover, payment would fall on their parents, who would be financially burdened if they had to pay income tax for themselves and their sons.³⁷ Thus, H. B. Butler (Secretary, Southern Provinces) was wrong to assert that if a father or guardian could afford to pay tax then he could afford to send his ward to school.³⁸ He assumed that only fathers paid school fees and overlooked mothers’ financial contributions.

This assessment is revealed in a petition against this taxation by some chiefs in Kalabari to the Resident of Calabar Province in the 1930s. They argued that student taxation was an indirect tax on mothers.³⁹ It is also evident in the case of J. O. Onyechem, a student of Igbo origin resident in Onitsha. In January 1928, he was admitted to Kings College Lagos, the premier secondary institution for boys located in the colonial capital. A year later, the school principal contacted the Superintendent of Education, Onitsha, seeking financial relief for the boy’s mother, a trader, who would experience potential difficulty

32 N. Azikiwe, *My Odyssey: An Autobiography*, Reprint, Ibadan 2001, p. 6.

33 Letter to the Assistant Director of Education, Southern Provinces, Enugu, from E. R. J. Hussey, September 1, 1933, National Archives Enugu (hereafter NAE), CSE 1/85/2969. In 1929, Hussey introduced changes to the prevalent school system that previously comprised a primary education that lasted eight years (Classes I and II for Infants, and Standards I to VI). As primary education became limited to six years, Standard IV, and not VI became the ultimate goal of primary education. The former Standards V and VI were converted into secondary school grades called Lower Middle Schools. N. I. Omenka, *The School in the Service of Evangelism: The Catholic Educational Impact in Eastern Nigeria, 1886–1950*, Leiden 1989, p. 152.

34 Precip from District Officer, NAE, CSE 1/85/2969.

35 He clarified his views in a 1943 pamphlet, *Taxation in Nigeria* published in Lagos by the African Book Company, Ltd. See Ottenberg Collection, reel 14.

36 *Taxing School Boys*, editorial, WAP, March 20, 1940, 4.

37 *School Boys & Taxation*, editorial, in: WAP, 8 May 1939, p. 4; *School Boys are Taxable*, editorial, in: WAP, 23 May 1939, p. 3.

38 Letter to the Resident (Calabar Province) from H. B. Butler, April 26, 1929, NAE, CSE 1/85/2969.

39 Precip, NAE, CSE 1/85/2969.

paying the required fees, she being responsible for his education.⁴⁰ Likewise, mothers elsewhere in western Nigeria were also primarily responsible for paying school fees, which made the profit incentive particularly powerful for those in trade. These mothers held high aspirations for their children, with the more prosperous trader boasting proudly about one or two sons educated through accumulated savings.⁴¹ Unsurprisingly, during wartime economic controls, one of the pressing complaints Lagos market women made against the government's food control scheme was how its unfair competition threatened the financing of their children's current and future education.⁴² It was standard for these predominately Muslim women (and particularly among rival wives living in polygamous marriages) to invest their profits towards social advancement, which included the education of their wards.⁴³

Thus, when the Eastern Region government absorbed primary school fees in 1957, it had relieved mothers financially and created opportunities for more girls to enter school. As shown in Table 1, enrolment figures for girls jumped from 244,557 to 417,071 that year. Let us not forget, although boys may have ceased to be prioritised over girls in the face of lean resources, a primary school qualification was already insufficient for the coveted white-collared clerk job, having been replaced by a new gold standard required for social advancement. Attaining a secondary school education had become the newest barrier to climb on the path to freedom.

4. The Education Riots of 1958

Building on the foundation of the 1930s and 1940s, education in colonial Nigeria witnessed its "most phenomenal expansion" in the 1950s.⁴⁴ In 1956, the Eastern Region's principal activity was preparation for the launch of its UPE scheme on January 1, 1957. Bearing the total cost of the scheme, the regional government eliminating education rates in April 1956, thereby abolishing all primary school fees effective on January 1, 1957.⁴⁵ In tune with this, it expanded teacher training facilities and secondary education, which had for some time been limited to a few. The Eastern Region expected to spend approximately 42 per cent of its 1957–58 expenditure on education.⁴⁶ Eligible for the UPE registration were children over five but under seven years on January 1, 1957. In May 1956, 481,691 children had registered.⁴⁷

40 Letter to O.H. Baynes from Principal, King's College Lagos, March 21, 1929, National Archives Ibadan (hereafter NAI), KC 1/4, KC 13 Vol I.

41 P.H. Baker, *Urbanization and Political Change: The Politics of Lagos, 1917–1967*, Berkeley 1974, p. 229.

42 Leaders of Lagos Market Women are Opposed to New Food Control Scheme, in: WAP, 1 November 1943, p. 1.

43 M. K. McIntosh, *Yoruba Women, Work, and Social Change*, Bloomington IN 2009, p. 157.

44 Fafunwa, *History of Education in Nigeria*, p. 166.

45 Eastern Region Nigeria, *Annual Summary of Education in the Eastern Region of Nigeria 1956* (bibliographic details missing), p. 2.

46 Eastern Region Nigeria, *Annual Summary of Education, 1956*, p. 7.

47 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

Table 1: Changes in School and Pupil Numbers in Eastern Region and Education Levels in 1956 and 1957

TYPE OF SCHOOL	NUMBER OF SCHOOLS		ENROLMENT					
			M		F		TOTAL	
	1956	1957	1956	1957	1956	1957	1956	1957
Primary	5066	6,986	530,587	792,096	244,557	417,071	1,209,167	122,1271
Secondary	59	68	9,810	10,684	1,308	1,558	12,242	13,960
Teacher Training	149	152	6,502	7,252	1,854	2,161	9,413	12,337
Technical & Vocational	3	20	329	3,008	18	92	3,000	3,361
All types	5277	7,226	547,238	813,040	247,737	420,882	1,233,932	1,250,92

Source: Federal Ministry of Education (Nigeria), Digest of Education Statistics, 1957, Lagos, n.d., p. 5.

Table 2: Changes in School and Pupil Numbers in Eastern Region and Education Levels in 1957 and 1958

TYPE OF SCHOOL	NUMBER OF SCHOOLS		ENROLMENT					
			M		F		TOTAL	
	1957	1958	1957	1958	1957	1958	1957	1958
Primary	6,986	6,620	792,096	787,777	417,071	433,494	1,209,16	1,221,271
Secondary	68	82	10,684	12,106	1,558	1,854	12,242	13,960
Teacher Training	152	157	7,252	9,764	2,161	2,573	9,413	12,337
Technical & Vocational	20	21	3,008	3,233	92	128	3,000	3,361
All types	7,226	6,890	813,040	812,880	420,882	438,049	1,233,93	1,250,929

Source: Federal Ministry of Education (Nigeria), Digest of Education Statistics, 1958, Lagos, n.d., 5.

At the end of 1957, the Eastern Regional government acknowledged the hasty implementation of the UPE, noting that the scheme's full effect on its financial resources was beginning to be felt. The attendant budget constraints required children in Standards V and VI to pay school fees to offset the additional expenses to be incurred with the introduction of secondary school subjects in their classes.⁴⁸ Consequently, the government announced modification proposals early in 1958 and reintroduced fees, a position taken without the consultation of the local government councillors.⁴⁹ However, it failed to mention if parents were consulted as well. The region's Ministry of Education analysed the fall out as follows:

Attendance in the schools dropped very steeply where parents could not pay the fees, and about 2,580 untrained teachers became redundant. By the end of the second quarter the schools were adjusting themselves to the changes, and at the close of the year the overall enrolment was 1,221,271 as against 1,209,167 in the previous year, that of the girls showed an over-all increase of 4 per cent. Over the same period there were 5 per cent fewer schools in operation than in 1957 and a 29 per cent decrease in the number of teachers. The ratio of trained to untrained teachers stood at 1:27.⁵⁰

The attendant effect of this reversal was most significant regarding primary education. While secondary schools and training colleges found raising their fees necessary, enrolment there was unaffected. The withdrawals came from primary schools.⁵¹ While 14 secondary schools remained opened, 364 primary schools were closed (see Table 2).

5. The Women Protest

The first quarter of the year [1958] was a period of unrest, instability and uncertainty. Public demonstrations by women and disorders occurred in many parts of the Region particularly in the Aba area.⁵²

As reported by the Eastern Region government above, the public received the reintroduction of fees with utmost dismay, and women in several parts of the Eastern Region protested. Jacob has perceived these kinds of public demonstrations (in the case of French Côte d'Ivoire women) as keeping with longstanding practices of public motherhood, a West African social institution whereby motherhood sanctioned women's moral interventions into community life.⁵³ Added to this explanation, the costs of education and deprivation of the additional income from an educated child's wages motivated Eastern Region Nigerian women to act. As the Labour Department also revealed, girls were

48 Udemezuo Onyido, Education Policy, Public Opinion, in: WAP, 6 January 1958, p. 2.

49 East Free Education, editorial, in: WAP, 6 February 1958, p. 2.

50 Eastern Region of Nigeria, Annual Report Ministry of Education 1958, Enugu 1960, p. 11.

51 Ibid., p. 2.

52 Ibid., p. 11.

53 E. Jacob, Militant Mothers: Gender and the Politics of Anticolonial Action in Côte d'Ivoire, in: Journal of African History 63 (2022) 3, pp. 348–367, there p. 349.

expected to maintain themselves and contribute to the family income.⁵⁴ Thus, mothers could not ignore the change in government's plans, which had begun to relieve them financially.

The NCNC had promised life more abundant, with education for the common man a significant element in this plan. While NCNC political manifestoes have escaped this author, other contemporary sources reveal what the people were expecting. First, the election manifesto of P.I. Mokelu, a candidate vying for the first municipal elections in Enugu in 1954, is revealing. According to the NCNC-backed candidate's poster, the ex-serviceman was "The only qualified candidate for Ward 9" because he was "a staunch loyal member of the N.C.N.C. The major political Party that champions the Right of the Common Man." As for another candidate, T.I. Agunwah, he was "The friend of the rich men, poor men and commoners."⁵⁵ Second, in a pamphlet attacking the NCNC Eastern government, the AG queried it for not embarking on free and compulsory primary education for the children of the 'common man' like its government did, if the NCNC was "truly a party of the common man."⁵⁶ Third, Mokuwugo Okoye, a former high-ranking member of the Zikist Movement⁵⁷ revealed a government betrayal. As he noted to Azikiwe:

*The much-vaunted free primary education of your Government which begins and ends with Infant Class I is a classic fraud that is justified neither by past promises nor present bankruptcy; half a loaf may be better than none, but one-eighth of a loaf is another thing. And when we add to this fact that the local authorities have been divested of their rating powers under your new Local Government and Finance Laws (and therefore can do little to remedy the deficiencies of the regional government in providing universal free education) and that no attempt has been made under the new Education Law to unify the school system [...] one realises the cynical betrayal of democratic education perpetrated by your Government [...].*⁵⁸

From *Pilot* reports, the protests occurred as early as February 4 in the Owerri and Aba Divisions, Port Harcourt, and parts of Ahoada.⁵⁹ A week later, the newspaper reported sporadic "outbreaks of lawlessness" instigated primarily by "riotous women demonstrators" in rural districts of the region. Furthermore, it reported that a local council hall was destroyed by a crowd of women at Yenogoa in Brass Division. At the same time, the rest house, teacher's quarters, and the school manager's residence were damaged. The disturbances at Isobe in the Ahoada area occurred on the morning of February 11, when

54 Nigeria, Annual Report of the Department of Labour, 1958–59, p. 24.

55 Campaign flyers, "N.C.N.C. Appointed Candidate," and "Vote for T. I. Agunwah WARD SIX," in (File 4): C. Enugu Town Notes, Paul Hair Papers, Private Collection.

56 "Action Group, 33 Whys? For the NCNC," printed for the Action Group Secretariat by APN Ltd., Lagos, n.d. in Nigeria news clippings and news releases (1 Jan 1947 – 31 Dec 1965), Claude Barnett Papers, History Vault, Proquest.

57 The movement was the radical arm of the NCNC that advocated civil disobedience among other means to delegitimise the colonial state.

58 Okoye, A Letter to Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, p. 88.

59 East Govt Won't Give Way to Mob Pressure, in: WAP, 5 February 1958, p. 1.

a crowd of over one hundred women burnt down a house. Elsewhere that morning, women at Omoko (25 miles northwest of Ahoada) fought with the police, reportedly employing stones to deter them successfully.⁶⁰ Days later, in Yenogoa in Brass Division, the *Pilot* reported that one man had died and three others had been injured.⁶¹ The following day, the death count had increased to two.⁶²

Many women were arrested and imprisoned for their part in the mayhem, significantly increasing the female prison population, which had been known for its comparatively small number.⁶³ The federal government, occupied by several NCNC politicians including Mbadiwe, blamed this increase squarely on the mass demonstrations by the women in the Eastern Region, who had swelled the prison population from 1,836 to 2,413 in 1958. (The following year, the prison population dropped to 2,181.)⁶⁴ Some women skillfully eluded imprisonment, as did ten women in the Owerri Division. They were arrested on February 18 but were eventually freed when a large crowd surrounded the police and demanded their release.⁶⁵ Amid the disturbances, the Eastern Region House of Assembly ratified by a vote of 62 to 11 the government's proposals to modify the UPE scheme.⁶⁶

Due to the intensity of the disturbances, the Governor-General invoked emergency powers in Ikot Ekpene Administrative Division, Port Harcourt, Ogoni and Ahoada Administrative Divisions, Bende and Okigwi Administrative Divisions, Aba Administrative Division, Owerri and Orlu Administrative Divisions, and the Area of Authority of the Enugu Urban District Council. The regulations covered "the control of arms and explosives, control of traffic, curfew, misleading reports, processions and meetings, punishment of looting, reporting of persons and restriction orders".⁶⁷ Moreover, police reinforcements were sent to the area, and four further units of police reinforcements were despatched from Lagos to deal with the disturbances.⁶⁸ In Bende Division, the emergency ended on March 4, 1958.⁶⁹

After the debacle, pundits questioned how protests over reintroducing school fees had produced violent demonstrations. In a letter to the columnist of the Women's Forum of the *Pilot*, a female teacher at the Women's Training College blamed men and NCNC opposition members for inciting the women. For this reason, the writer surmised that the protestors should be acquitted for their actions.⁷⁰ British colonial officials similarly

60 Demonstrations Shift to Rural Areas of East, in: WAP, 12 February 1958, p. 1.

61 Four Injured at Okaki Village Now Empty, in: WAP, 17 February 1958, p. 1.

62 Modifications to Primary Education Scheme Okayed, in: WAP, 18 February 1958, p. 1.

63 Federation of Nigeria, Annual Report on the Federal Prisons Department for the Year, 1957–58, Lagos 1959, p. 5.

64 Ibid., p. 15; Federation of Nigeria, Annual Report on the Federal Prisons Department for the Year, 1956–57, bibliographic details missing, p. 15; Federation of Nigeria, Annual Report on the Federal Prisons Department for the Year, 1958–59, Lagos 1960, p. 17.

65 Another Rioter Killed in Clash with Police: 22 Policemen Injured, in: WAP, 19 February 1958, p. 1.

66 Calm Returns to East, WAP, 19 February 1958, p. 1.

67 Emergency Powers Imposed in East, in: WAP, 6 February 1958, p. 1.

68 Ibid., p. 1.

69 N. Barwick (Administrative Officer, Bende Division), Bulletin to all departments and firms in Umuahia, 'Public Notice,' 4 March 1958, Bodleian Libraries, Oxford, MSS.Afr.s.2127, Box 3, File 4.

70 Miss Shalma, Eastern Women in Prison, Women's Forum, in: WAP, 22 February 1958, p. 6.

upheld the instigation narrative. Notably, N. Barwick, the District Officer of Bende Division, reported that most people believed that men had instigated the riots, and probably those politically opposed to Azikiwe's government. While Barwick accepted the first allegation and conceded the second possibility, his investigations failed to uncover any male "puppet master", a perennial obsession with the colonial authorities dealing with women in that part of the territory. Perhaps the colonial authorities were reminded of the Women's War in 1929, when their colleagues similar looked for male instigators, being disdainful of the women's agency. Under the false assumption that African women were suppressed and oppressed within a male dominated patriarchal society, they had been duly astonished at the "irrational" behaviour of these Igbo women. Consequently, they wished to ascertain the ringleaders and plotters of this 'riot' in order to prevent a repeat incident through a Commission of Inquiry. However, as van Allen has shown, while men supported the 1929 protests, none of them were involved in the actual events.⁷¹

Barwick, who dismissed the role of the influential K. O. K. Onyioha,⁷² despite musing that he thrived on trouble, traced the primary impulse for developments to "the chief woman" in the area. However, in a letter to the Deputy Governor, Enugu, he acknowledged that although the protests were undoubtedly actuated by orders of a sort, possibly issued from male sources in Owerri or Aba Divisions, or both, he was aware of how the origins of "these mysterious upheavals" were "often mysterious".⁷³ While we cannot divorce the riots from the broader political maelstroms in the region – notably the region-wide challenge to Azikiwe's leadership and NCNC domination – clearly, Barwick failed to read the women's mood.

In his address to the Eastern Region House of Assembly detailing the adjustments made to the contributions, the acting Minister of Education, Eastern Region, B. C. Okwu, considered it necessary to contrast the region's UPE scheme to that of the Western Region. In his conclusion, he stated "in unmistakable terms" that the regional government had

*always regarded the provision of a sound education to as many people as possible to be a responsibility of the highest priority and it is only in the last resort that it is prepared to make any decision that will have an adverse effect on this important service believing as it does, in the words of Disraeli, "that upon the education of the people of this country the future of this country depends".*⁷⁴

With this statement, Okwu was trying to assuage the people's mood and cover up their failures.

71 J. van Allen, 'Sitting on a Man': Colonialism and the Lost Political Institutions of Igbo Women, in: Canadian Journal of African Studies, 6 (1972) 2, p. 175.

72 Onyioha was formerly the organising secretary of the Nigeria Legion, the ex-servicemen's union formed in 1945 by Nigerian soldiers serving in various theatres of war in the Middle East and South East Asia.

73 Letter to the Deputy Governor, Enugu from N. Barwick, "The Emergency, February, 1958", 7 March 1958, Bodleian Libraries, MSS.Afr.s.2127, Box 3, File 4.

74 B. C. Okwu, West Education Standard Below That of East, in: WAP, 19 February 1958, p. 2. Also see Malicious Press Campaigns Inflamm Eastern Trouble, in: WAP, 17 February 1958, p. 2.

6. Public Reactions to the Protests

*I do hope that 1957 has taken away with it this worst feature of Nigerian journalism. I do hope that in the New Year we have entered, the Nigerian Press will strive to come back to the throne – to lead, to inform, to bring understanding to the masses of our people by emphasising only those things that will encourage more understanding and by 'writing down' those issues that will bring misunderstanding, bitterness and confusion.*⁷⁵

Nelson Ottah's plea against inciting the public was ignored by the Eastern Region government, which sternly threatened the rioters with the strong arm of the law. Following the demonstrations, Mr. Okwu, acting Minister of Education, accused certain sections of the Nigerian press of spreading "malicious nonsense... with a clear intention of aggravating an already difficult situation". He blamed their "campaign of half-truths, tendentious statements, and deliberate calumnies," for aggravating the situation. The women, he claimed, had been incited to agitate and demonstrate by men who felt "frustrated and incapable of realising their life ambitions."⁷⁶ Indeed, the regional government was facing political opposition from within the NCNC, but the minister conveniently overlooked the *Pilot's* role in escalating the crisis. On February 4, the regional government warned all the women protestors against lawlessness and violence during their demonstration.⁷⁷ Then, on February 10, premier Azikiwe accentuated in a radio broadcast that his government would "never surrender to mob violence" in protest against the reintroduction of school fees. Nonetheless, his government was still open to discussion if the people properly presented their case.⁷⁸

A day before Azikiwe's pronouncements, at least three police constables had been injured, and several suffered minor bruises when two units of about 100 men tried to disperse a throng of men at Ngor Opkuala about 16 miles northwest of Aba on February 10. While the newspaper report failed to mention female protestors, it noted that the agitations had spread to Brass and Ahaoda.⁷⁹ The following day, over three hundred women from Aguata in the Awka area petitioned Mr. Okwu. He rejected their petition and advised them to return home. The minister had already revoked Section V of the relevant UPE regulation, which had previously criminalised the acceptance of fees from pupils attending free primary schools.⁸⁰ It is revealing that after the regional government declined a similar petition from a group of Ohaji women concerning the increasing fees, they begged to remain "under the white men".⁸¹

As Stevenson has concluded, what these women were complaining about was that the colonial state, now primarily administered by Nigerians, solely served primordial patron-

75 Nelson Ottah, Did We make Good Use of Past Year – 1957?, in: WAP, 3 January 1958, p. 2.

76 Malicious Press Campaigns Inflamm Eastern Trouble, in: WAP, 17 February 1958, p. 2.

77 East Govt Won't Give Way to Mob Pressure: Demonstrators Warned, in: WAP, 5 February 1958, p. 1.

78 No Surrender to Mob Violence: Zik, in: WAP, 11 February 1958, p. 1.

79 Rioting Aba Crowd Overwhelm Police, in: WAP, 11 February 11, p. 1.

80 Demonstrations Shift to Rural Areas of East: Women Mob Destroy Yenogoa Council Hall, in: WAP, 12 February 1958, p. 1.

81 Cited in Stevenson, 'You Have Your Say, We Have Our Way', p. 2.

age-driven interests.⁸² While the women were within their rights to criticise the elite-led Eastern Regional government, the looting which accompanied demonstrations attracted condemnation of the women protestors. As the *Pilot* editor queried,

*If looting and damage to Government property were the expression of the people's opposition to introduction of school fees, then we say they are wrong. Can the looters satisfy themselves that they are protesting against payment of school fees for some of their children? The answer to this is, 'no' Protest and looting are two separate and distinct things. Looting is criminal; the law does not allow it.*⁸³

The *Pilot* editorials reveal the government's concerns. In one piece, the editor exposed that the regional government had "wisely decided not to sacrifice other social services on the altar of universal free primary education". He claimed that the Ministry of Education's announcement reintroducing admission fees was not unanticipated. Thus, he complained, the more directly affected stakeholders had reacted in a most uncondusive manner and in a way "bordering on sabotage".⁸⁴ The writer was alluding to sabotage directed at the regional government, which now discouraged dissent of any kind. Demonstrations and other forms of protest, which had once served to further anticolonialism became unjustified under largely local leadership. Azikiwe, who had once used the shooting of unarmed Nigerian strikers in 1949 to score political points against the colonial administration,⁸⁵ excused his government's shooting of protestors at Okaki, in which two men died. As he was quoted in the *Pilot*, "[T]he police were forced to open fire under extreme provocation".⁸⁶

In the following editorial, the *Pilot* editor parroted the warnings of the Eastern Region government, which prohibited lawlessness from demonstrators, and advised them to "curb their over-zealousness". The invectives continued as the editor condescendingly remarked:

If reason had not forsaken these women – especially their leaders who clandestinely direct the demonstration – they would see readily the futility of wasting their energies. Probably they do not know that no Government, however democratic, will yield to mob pressure even if the mob is composed mainly of women. The way to win Government sympathy and reasonable redress is not via lawlessness and mass hysteria.

As the editor claimed, most of these demonstrating women were beneficiaries of the free primary education scheme, which the government had willingly introduced. Therefore, he saw it as "the height of ingratitude" for women to behave in such a manner.⁸⁷ The

82 Ibid., pp. 1, 2.

83 Demonstration or Looting? editorial, in: WAP, 17 February 1958, p. 2.

84 East Free Education, editorial, in: WAP, 6 February 1958, p. 2.

85 For more on this shooting, see S. Alimi, Labour Agitation, Newspaper Press and Radical Nationalism in Nigeria: Analysis of the Enugu Colliery Shootings, in: Labor History 65 (2023) 1, pp. 142–159, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0023656X.2023.2259320>.

86 Calm Returns to East, in: WAP, 19 February 1958, p. 1.

87 East Govt Warns, editorial, in: WAP, 7 February 1958, p. 2.

editor's talk of benefitting ignores the fact that the scheme ran for less than two years. A few days later, the Pilot editor sought to complete the "unfinished job of persuading the demon to loosen his grip on the reasoning faculty of some Eastern women" who were still protesting. He justified the "harsh and brutal" response to the acts of lawlessness of an otherwise "considerate and sympathetic" Eastern Region government by blaming the protestors for their reactions against the administration's ineptitude. The editor's relapse to colonial laced, sexist banality conveyed a picture of women's uncontrolled, irrational behaviour. As Iweriebor argued, the colonial authorities embraced "wild, crude, and uninformed excursion into medical/psychiatric speculation" as a form of escapism from the real issues at stake.⁸⁸ In this case, the escapist explanation is reminiscent of the referencing made to their forebears during the 1929 Women's War in southeastern Nigeria.⁸⁹ The editor ended by laying the success or failure of the free UPE scheme entirely on the people – "If they finance it by paying their taxes it will succeed; but they can as well wreck it by evading payment of taxes".⁹⁰

Men across Nigeria supported the Pilot's position by defending the Eastern regional government and condemning the chaos. After all, they, in 1954, the district councils, manned mainly by men, had challenged the "free education scheme" because it would increase the already onerous taxes on local governments based on their contributions to the scheme.⁹¹ Notably, J. I. G. Onyia dismissed the fact that primary education was free in the Western Region, the region's competitor. In holistically reviewing Nigeria's education system, Onyia called it time to educate the people on the need to support schools and development projects that involved many of their children and brought prosperity to Nigeria. For him, it was "mischievous to play party politics with such vital issues which were the cardinal points of the struggle for self-government."⁹²

On his part, Fred Anyiam, a long-time associate of Azikiwe, blamed the scheme's failures on many Igbo parents living in Southern Cameroons, who had sent their children to the Eastern Region without making the corresponding tax payments to the regional revenue. He argued that unlike the other regions, the Eastern Region government could not prevent the enrolment of these children. Furthermore, he placed some blame on the many businessmen who had conspired with the tax assessment officers to evade tax. As he noted

*Many wealthy traders who ply between Lagos and Onitsha, Aba and Port Harcourt hardly pay their taxes either in the Region or in Lagos. When questioned in the East they give their Lagos addresses and if in Lagos they give their Onitsha, Aba or Port Harcourt addresses. Many of them do not even register their lorries in the Region.*⁹³

88 E. E. G. Iweriebor, *Radical Politics in Nigeria, 1945–1950: The Significance of the Zikist Movement*, Zaria 1996, p. 50, n72.

89 Edeagu, *Critiquing Witness Testimonies*, p. 55.

90 We Return Again, editorial, in: WAP, 10 February 1958, p. 2.

91 Stevenson, *The University of the Village*, p. 156.

92 J. I. G. Onyia, *Awolowo's Free Education*, in: WAP, 19 February 1958, p. 2.

93 Fred Anyiam, *Why Lamentations?* in: WAP, 19 February 1958, p. 2.

Writing from Ijebu Ode, Sulaimon Bello condemned the lawbreaking, looting, and destruction of property and described the protests as unconstitutional and unhelpful. In his opinion, the people protesting were ignorant about how much cheaper the Eastern Region offered education as compared to its Western counterpart, which was touting free primary education. He urged the women to use their position to persuade their relatives who were “big traders” in the larger towns to declare their correct incomes for proper income tax assessment to yield additional revenue, which would enable additional benefits from their government.⁹⁴ Another male commentator, E. E. Enwere described the women’s demonstration as “the height of ingratitude” to the regional government, and blamed tax evaders [primarily men] for instigating the protests.⁹⁵ F. B. Peters similarly called the protests “senseless agitations” by inhabitants, many of them [obviously men] allegedly adapt in tax evasion.⁹⁶

A school teacher was the sole woman who publicly supported the women protestors in the *Pilot*. The writer acknowledged that while the regional government had acted with “good and honest intentions”, the weight of the burden of fees was more women’s responsibility than men’s – explaining the former’s reactions. She urged the columnist to help secure the women’s release or appeal to the government to reconsider its stand or reduce their terms of imprisonment.⁹⁷ In contrast, Miss Shalma, the columnist, sympathised with the women’s plight but rejected the appeal for the women’s release as she would never support acts of lawlessness:

*If a female teacher was one of those sent to prison, that is good lesson for her. She ought to have known better. She ought to have set a better example for others to follow. I am sure that all female teachers in the country are among the few educated women in our society and if they fail to set lofty examples, how can they claim to be educated? I have been feeling that these female demonstrations were enhanced by the irresponsible acts of educated but misguided female teachers or by educated but irresponsible women. I quite agree with you that we are all women and have common feelings towards our children. You see, the law does not make such exceptions. The law will punish men and women when they commit acts against it. This is my stand and if you still feel you have a new way out, please write to me.*⁹⁸

The protesting women were also supported by an article by the London’s *Daily Telegraph*’s Commonwealth Correspondent, R. H. C. Steed.⁹⁹ According to Steed’s report, which reported that from January 27 until the article was released on March 4, “tens of thousands of women in areas covering nearly half of the Eastern Region were up in arms”

94 Sulaimon Bello, East Education is Cheaper, Your Letters, in: WAP, 19 February 1958, p. 2.

95 E. E. Enwere, Ingratitude, Your Letters, in: WAP, 19 February 1958, p. 2.

96 F. B. Peters, Eastern Situation, Your Letters, in: WAP, 17 February 1958, p. 2.

97 Miss Shalma, Eastern Women in Prison, in: WAP, Women’s Forum, 22 February 1958, p. 6.

98 Ibid.

99 R.H.C. Steed, ‘White Man Don’t Go’: A Challenge to E. Nigeria’s Rulers, newspaper clipping in: Daily Telegraph, 4 March 1958, Bodleian Libraries, Oxford, MSS.Afr.s.2127, Box 3, File 4.

in education riots. They had started by rampaging around the closed schools before the demonstrations escalated into violence.

Figure 1: Daily Telegraph, March 4, 1958.

"White Man Don't Go": A Challenge to E. Nigeria's Rulers

Eastern Nigeria's education riots were warning to the Premier, Dr. Azikiwe, not to ignore popular discontent with the leadership under regional self-rule. Our Commonwealth Correspondent here reports widespread disillusionment and a prospect of further unrest soon.

— From R. H. C. STEED —

LAGOS.

THE mass demonstrations by the women of Eastern Nigeria against school fees were the biggest "direct action" campaign by what used to be called the gentle sex since the Suffragette movement. For nearly a month from Jan. 27, tens of thousands of women in areas covering nearly half of the Eastern Region were up in arms. At first they merely rampaged around closing schools, in such numbers that the police were often unable to disperse them. Then they began smashing up local government offices, closing markets, storming courts where their sisters were being tried, breaking open gaols and releasing prisoners.

They man-handled local councillors of the Government party—the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons—and burned their houses. They stoned officials' cars and attacked some of the few M.P.s who ventured into their constituencies.

The Federal police, about half of whose junior officers are Nigerians, showed exemplary restraint, although 100 of their number were injured. It was only when tribesmen from jungle villages joined in the fray and began shooting with bows and arrows and home-made shotguns that the police opened fire.

Militant Breed

THE disturbances have now subsided, although there are still occasional demonstrations, and most of the schools are now open. But the causes of the trouble are still there and the populace remains strongly disaffected.

The reimposition of school fees a year after free universal primary education had been introduced sparked off a mood that had already become inflammable as a result of an accumulation of other grievances.

The first thing to explain is why the campaign, if that word can be applied to anything so completely spontaneous and unorganised, was waged almost exclusively by women.

The women of the Ibo tribe, who predominate in the Eastern Region of Nigeria, have done this kind of thing before in protest against tax increases, but never on such a scale. A formidable breed, monopolising the market side of the trading that is the passion of the Ibos, they range from the pathetic groups who sit by the roadside with handfuls of dusty oranges, bananas or plantains, to the mammoths in the great markets, some of them worth thousands of pounds and proprietors of valuable real estate.

Most of the Ibo women are engaged with their husbands and families in some form of agriculture but they have special preserves and a recognised share of the produce out of which they provide, among other

things, for the education of the younger children.

The thirst for education in this part of Nigeria is something that has to be seen to be believed. Added to this is the most important factor that polygamy is widespread and each wife is consumed by the ambition to achieve pre-eminence for her children.

In 1956, an entirely new, heavier and much more highly centralised system of taxation was introduced, the pill being sugared with the explanation that it would pay for universal primary education. The Government was warned by the Governor of the Eastern Region and by its senior advisers against grossly optimistic expectations of increased revenue and also of the problems of providing free education in a poor country. But all to no avail.

Dr. Azikiwe, the Premier, was committed by election pledges and smarting because his rivals in the Western Region had already beaten him by three years in the education stakes. Universal primary education was introduced with a fanfare on Jan. 1, 1957. The number of children at school increased suddenly from 900,000 to 1,300,000. By January this year it was 1,800,000.

Hitherto the schools had been run almost entirely by the various missions, supported by Government grants supplemented by fees of about 10s. a quarter for each child. They were now to be financed entirely and more closely controlled by the central Government. In addition 2,000 new State schools were built.

The new schools consisted only of a single medium-sized hall covered by a roof, but almost entirely open at the sides. In the wet season torrential rain swept right through, soaking the children and the books. Teaching staff was provided almost entirely by 16-year-old boys and girls commandeered from secondary schools, usually with only one experienced teacher for each school.

Crisis Postponed

SUCH shock tactics might well be excused, even admired, in view of the desperate need for education. But it soon became apparent that the new tax system was producing not more money than before but less. In addition the Budget for 1957-58, although it allocated 43 per cent. of total anticipated revenue to education, underestimated the amount actually needed by at least one-fifth.

Dr. Azikiwe let things drift in this hopeless manner throughout 1957. Then, without any warning to party, M.P.s or public, he suddenly announced towards the end of January the introduction of fees ranging from 22 yearly for infants to 25 for the top class, plus a registration fee of 10s. for each child.

A few days after the rioting began he announced that two weeks' grace would be allowed for the payment of fees and that a special meeting of Parliament would be held for a full and frank discussion. He added a stern warning that all necessary force would be used against rioters. The only result was that the disturbances became more violent and widespread.

When Parliament met, the Government announced that all the proposed fees would be abolished. It then propounded an alternative plan to raise the money from "local authorities or donations or contributions or payment directly by parents" at about the same rate in respect of each child as had been previously demanded as fees. By then the demonstrations were fading in the face of more determined and better organised police measures.

The next crisis will come at the end of March, when the first quarter's "local contributions" will be overdue. There seems little likelihood of the money being raised. The ordinary worker even in the towns earns only 30s. a week, and farm workers earn even less.

The most likely outcome is that many parents will have to take their children away from school and things will be where they were before universal primary education.

Words and Deeds

BUT the disappointment over education is not the only one that the mass of the people in Eastern Nigeria have suffered during the past four years of "Nigerianisation," culminating in full regional self-government last August.

They have not received the benefits they were promised. On the contrary, they have felt the pinch in a dozen ways resulting from the run-down in the efficiency and integrity of the administration. The number of British officials has been halved and is still falling, while the influence and contact with the local population of those who remain is fast disappearing.

At the same time the great mass of the simple people are affronted by the opulence of their parvenu Nigerian rulers. The indignant Nigerian women lay in wait only for the "long cars" of their own countrymen. They never molest Europeans.

It is all very well for the Ministers to admit in Parliament that they have made mistakes and say that this is the inevitable result of their inexperience. What for them is an intriguing and profitable exercise in trial and error is blood, sweat, toil and tears for the people.

The new leaders in Eastern Nigeria, especially the hitherto adored Dr. Azikiwe, showed up badly in their hour of trial. Instead of going out and appealing to their own people they stayed in safety, asked for police protection and called for more drastic action by the police.

The ebullient Azikiwe lost his chances on the all-Nigerian stage in the African Continental Bank scandal two years ago but his mystique with his admiring Ibos seemed unimpaired. The education riots have now dealt this a serious blow. The slogans of the demonstrators, "No More Black Man Rule" and "White Man Don't Go," were too widely used to be lightly dismissed.

It is too early yet to say whether this is a new factor that might slow down the march to independence in Nigeria or even be the first sign of a startling change in the whole colonial question. At least it is a challenge to the new rulers of Eastern Nigeria to start delivering the goods.

They then proceeded to demolish local government offices, close markets, storm the courts where other women were being tried, broke open jails and released prisoners. Furthermore, they had man-handled local councillors of the NCNC and burned their houses, pelted officials' cars with stones and attacked some of the few Members of Parliament who ventured into their constituencies.

According to the article, drawing reference from the 1929 Women's War protests launched in the same geographical area on a larger scale, these protests were ignited by an accumulation of other grievances. It was waged exclusively by women, particularly among the Igbo who predominated the Eastern Region, because they provided for the education of their younger children. Besides, the article noted, polygyny was widespread, and each wife was engrossed with achieving pre-eminence for her children. Therefore, introducing "an entirely new, heavier and much higher centralised system of taxation" under the guise of paying for the UPE hurt mothers' finances.

While this article reads like a hit piece as it indicted the regional government, hinted at the unreadiness of Nigerians to assume leadership, and revealed the high-handedness of the regional government, it exposed broader unresolved socio-economic issues. One was that Nigerians had not received the economic benefits promised during the four years of Nigerianisation. Instead, they were affronted with the opulence of their leadership. Thus,

The indignant Nigerian women lay in wait only for the 'long cars' of their own countrymen. They never molest Europeans. It is all very well for the Ministers to admit in Parliament that they have made mistakes and say that this is the inevitable result of their inexperience. What for them is an intriguing and profitable exercise in trial and error is blood, sweat, toil and tears for the people.

While the article debated whether it was too early to say if the women's protests would decelerate Nigeria's march to independence or posed the first sign of "a startling new trend in the whole colonial question", the piece concluded it was at least a challenge to the new Eastern Region government to start meeting the people's expectations.

7. Conclusion

By creatively filling archival gaps and silences through the use of newspaper content, this article shows that women's struggles helped bring self-government but did not shape its outcome. With self-government within a colonial framework, mothers in the Eastern Region had expected freedom from direct and indirect taxation. Instead, they realised that a change in leadership had denied them succour. While self-government had been won through the "bitter struggles of the people", the majority felt cheated since what they, the common people, had fought for had not been realised.¹⁰⁰ Understandably, the mobilisation of political support for the local elite required electoral campaign prom-

100 The Socialist Workers and Farmers Party, *The Manifesto* [1960s?], pp. 5–6, Institute of Commonwealth Studies, University of London, PPNR.SWFP.

ises.¹⁰¹ However, once the NCNC-led Eastern Region government had succeeded in capturing state power, they were nonchalant about satisfying the majority of their constituents. The Education Riots in the Eastern Region were the visible outcome of ordinary women's dissatisfaction over the re-introduction of school fees.

It is not that the Eastern Region government absolved themselves from all responsibility towards children's education. In 1958, it allocated 293 scholarships to students vying for places in secondary schools, a significant increase from the 226 it offered a year before the scheme started.¹⁰² However, no provision was made to help offset fees for primary education beyond Infant Classes I & II. Women in the region who were largely responsible for educating their wards, especially in primary schools, were short-changed. The education riots demonstrated that the indigenous educated elite and nouveau political class were no different from the British overlords. The events of 1958 and the echo in the press also revealed the stubbornness, inefficiency, insensitivity, and high-handedness of the regional government, which displayed traits they had once condemned in the colonial administration. Thus, for a temporary moment, non-elite women in the Eastern Region at the dawn of flag freedom briefly contemplated remaining "under the white men" rather than deal with a duplicitous minority who Okoye once collectively labelled as a "cold confraternity of crooks, cranks and careerists".¹⁰³

101 J. Burbank and F. Cooper, *Post-Imperial Possibilities: Eurasia, Eurafica, Afroasia*, Princeton NJ 2023, p. 7.

102 Eastern Region of Nigeria, *Annual Report Ministry of Education 1958*, p. 21; Eastern Region of Nigeria, *Annual Summary of Education in the Eastern Region, 1956*, p. 20.

103 Okoye, *A Letter to Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe*, p. 185.