

Women's War Lesson Plan

Central Historical Question:

What happened at the start of the Women's War of 1929?

Note: This lesson could be included in a unit on European imperialism in the 19th and 20th centuries. Before taking part in this lesson, students should have a general sense of the timeline of European colonization of Africa and motives for imperialism. However, students do not need to have detailed background knowledge about methods of colonial rule or the British colonization of Nigeria prior to the lesson. If they already have this background knowledge, you may want to spend less time reviewing the background information in the PowerPoint.

Materials:

- Copies of Documents A-B
- Copies of Women's War Guiding Questions
- Women's War PowerPoint

Plan of Instruction:

1. Use the PowerPoint to review background information about British colonialism in Nigeria and the Women's War.
 - a. Slide 2: Colonial Nigeria and the Igbo. *Starting in the late 1880s, the British implemented a system of indirect rule in their African colonies. Under indirect rule, the British would typically keep local leaders and government institutions in place and appoint a small number of British officials to oversee local leaders and ensure that British policies were followed. The Igbo in Southeastern Nigeria had a decentralized system of government, so they did not have leaders with enough authority to give orders to others. As a result, the British struggled to find Igbo leaders who could enforce their policies. Their solution was to appoint leaders, called warrant chiefs, and give them the authority to run the courts and collect taxes. The people that the British selected to be warrant chiefs were often unpopular with the people that they oversaw.*
 - b. Slide 3: Economic Context. *The British would typically pay for the colonial government by taxing the colonies. The British imposed a tax on Igbo men in 1928. In 1929, rumors spread that women would be taxed as well. This angered Igbo women, many of whom already resented British rule and the fact that the British ignored their traditional roles and rights in Igbo society. Many women also worried about the economic effects of a new tax. The price of palm oil—which they produced for a living—had fallen dramatically after the market crash of 1929, resulting in less income for Igbo villages. An additional tax, the Igbo worried, would cause economic hardship.*

- c. Slide 4: *Igbo women began meeting to discuss the rumors of a tax and to decide what they should do about it. In November 1929, a confrontation occurred in the Igbo village of Oloko between a woman named Nwanyeruwa and a man named Emeruwa, who had been sent by the local warrant chief to collect information needed for taxation. Word of the confrontation between Nwanyeruwa and Emeruwa spread quickly and thousands of women from the surrounding countryside descended on government offices in Oloko to protest the rumored tax. (We will read more about this confrontation in a minute, so keep this in mind.) The demonstration in Oloko involved “sitting,” a traditional type of protest by Igbo women to object to the actions of men. Sitting often included boycotts, strikes, and late night demonstrations at a man’s house in which women would sing, dance, and pound on the house.*

The protests spread to dozens of villages throughout Southeastern Nigeria over the next month, with women calling for government reforms. Collectively, these protests are known as the Women’s War. The protests involved thousands of women, and in some cases the protestors damaged and looted government buildings, including courts, prisons, and district offices. The British response was often violent. Over fifty women were killed and dozens more injured. The protests ended in late December as the British increased their efforts to put down the demonstrations with force. Although the protests did not lead to dramatic and immediate changes in Nigerian society, historians believe that the Women’s War did influence later reforms, including the decision in 1933 to replace the unpopular warrant chief system with a council system of government. This new system was more representative and a group of local leaders ran affairs instead of a warrant chief.

- d. Slide 5: Introduce/review Central Historical Question: *Although historians generally agree that a confrontation between Nwanyeruwa and Emeruwa triggered the Women’s War, historical accounts disagree about exactly what happened at the very start of the war. Today we are going to look at two different perspectives on what happened at the start of the Women’s War and think carefully about why these two versions of events are different. When reading these accounts, we will focus especially on sourcing and corroboration.*

2. Introduce/Review Sourcing and Corroboration

Note: If your students are already familiar with sourcing and corroboration, you may want to shorten your introduction of these skills or proceed directly to part three of the lesson. As a reminder, these questions are also featured on the sourcing and corroboration posters available for free at <https://sheg.stanford.edu/intro-materials>. You may want to reference the posters if you have them displayed in your room.

- a. Point out that historians make claims based upon evidence often found in historical documents. In order to gather credible evidence, historians evaluate the reliability, or trustworthiness, of different historical sources. In order to help them evaluate reliability and trustworthiness, historians *source* documents before they begin reading them. They also *corroborate* documents to see if the documents tell the same story and to help them decide which documents are most reliable and trustworthy.
- b. *Sourcing* involves asking—and doing your best to carefully answer—a series of questions about the author, his/her point of view, as well as when and why the document was written:
 - i. Who wrote this?
 - ii. What is the author’s perspective?
 - iii. Why was it written?
 - iv. When was it written?
 - v. Where was it written?
- c. *Corroborating* involves putting multiple documents in conversation with each other and asking yourself questions about how the documents are similar and different and why that might be the case:
 - i. What do other documents say?
 - ii. Do the documents agree? If not, why?
 - iii. What are other possible documents?
 - iv. What documents are most reliable?
- d. Asking and answering these questions helps historians evaluate whether or not they think documents are reliable and what narrative they believe about an event.
- e. Explain to students that sourcing and corroborating can be difficult skills, but they are going to see both modeled today as well as get a chance to practice the skills themselves.

3. Hand out Document A and Model Sourcing

Note: There are Guiding Questions for Document A at the end of the lesson plan in case you would rather have the students analyze the document instead of modeling your thinking. If you choose to have students answer the guiding questions, you will want to review their answers before moving on to Document B. The modeling guide below can inform your discussion of the Guiding Questions.

- a. After passing out copies of Document A, explain to students that you are going to model how to *source* a historical document.

*The first thing I want to do before I start reading a historical source is look at the **source** information at the bottom of the document. I want to think about who wrote it, when and where they wrote it, who their audience was, and why they might have written it. So, I see from the source information that the author is named Margery Perham and this is an excerpt from a book called Native Administration in Nigeria, which was published in 1937. That's eight years after the Women's War. Looking to the top of the page, I can see that Perham was a British historian who was particularly interested in African history. So that helps explain why she might have been interested in Nigeria (since it was a British colony) and why there is a time lag between the Women's War and when Perham wrote about it.*

- b. When you finish modeling sourcing, explain to students that another part of analyzing a historical document is *close reading*:

Now that I've considered who wrote the document and when they wrote it, I'm going to start reading it. I'm going to read very carefully—what we call close reading—and keep the Central Historical Question in mind while I read. I'm trying to figure out what happened during the 1929 Women's War, so I'm going to pay particular attention to any details from Perham's account about what happened.

- c. As you read through Perham's account, focus on three key sections of the text:
- i. The encounter between Emeruwa and Nwanyeruwa: *According to Perham, Nwanyeruwa got mad at Emeruwa for ordering her to count her animals. She reacted by saying "Was your mother counted?" This might have been a pretty inflammatory or disrespectful thing to say. I wonder how Emeruwa reacted. Perham wrote, "they closed, seizing each other by the throat." It sounds like they both acted at the same time, like neither one really attacked the other. Maybe they both offended each other and they were both responsible for attacking each other.*
 - ii. Perham's focus on the excitability and fervor of the women: *Perham writes that "all night they danced around his house" and "grew hourly more excited," and then they eventually "mobbed" Okugo's compound (house). These descriptions make me think that the women were angry and maybe even a little bit threatening or scary. I wonder why Perham chose these words and what she thought about the protesters? Her words make me think that the protesters were to blame for what happened.*
 - iii. What happened at the start of the Women's War? *Perham writes that Okugo's "own people tried to defend him" but that the women "mobbed" him and "damaged his house." It sounds like Okugo's*

people might have attacked the protesters, but Perham says they were acting out of defense against the mobbing protesters. That makes me think that maybe Perham thinks the women were most responsible for starting the war by attacking the warrant chief's compound.

- d. *Now that we've carefully read the source, let's think more carefully about how reliable we think it is.* Elicit student input on this question; there is no absolutely right or wrong answer, push students to use evidence from the text to support their answers. Students might note, for example, Perham's possible bias as a British citizen or the fact that she relies on a British District Officer's account of the women's actions to tell the bulk of her story.

4. Hand out Document B

- a. Explain to students that they are now going to have a chance to practice the skill of sourcing. They are also going to close read Document B and use it to corroborate Margery Perham's account from Document A. They will work with a partner to source and read Document B carefully and answer Guiding Questions that will help ensure that they carefully source, closely read, and corroborate the document.
- b. If students are relatively new to sourcing, instruct them to answer Guiding Questions 1-3 in pairs before reading Document B; then discuss these questions as a class before students read the document. If students are more experienced with sourcing, they can complete Questions 1-3 and move directly into reading the document.
- c. Students read and answer Guiding Questions with a partner.
- d. Discuss students' answers to the Guiding Questions. Focus on Questions 4, 5, and 6
 - i. Question 4: According to Nwanyoji, she questioned why she should be taxed and then Emeruwa attacked her by grabbing her throat.
 - ii. Question 5: Although the narrative is not completely clear, Nwanyoji implies that the Warrant Chief and District Officer started the violence. She said that the women were sitting outside Okugo's house, preparing and eating food, and then a woman was wounded with an arrow. She then said that the women accused Okugo of fighting with the women, even though they had only come to ask questions.
 - iii. Question 6: There is no right or wrong answer to the question of whether Document B is trustworthy, but push students to give specific reasons or evidence to support their thinking. Students

might note, for example, that this document is from the perspective of someone who participated in the rebellion (unlike Perham) and was recorded just a year after the rebellion. Students could think this document is more biased because of Nwanyoji's participation in the rebellion, or it could be more credible because she was actually there. Nwanyoji does not provide a lot of detail about how the violence began—she simply says that a woman was wounded with an arrow.

5. Synthesis and Discussion

- a. Students answer corroboration questions (Questions 7-10) in pairs.
- b. Lead a class discussion on students' answers to the Corroboration Questions as well as the additional discussion questions. You might begin the discussion with Questions 7 and 8 and make a list of similarities and differences between the accounts. Or if you think your students are ready, you may want to proceed directly to a more general discussion of the documents, including the following questions:
 - i. Why don't these documents agree about all the details of what happened during the Women's War?
 - ii. Which document, if either, do you find more trustworthy? Why? Use evidence from the documents to support your claims.
 - iii. What other perspectives would you like to read in order to find out more about what happened during the Women's War? What details need further corroboration? What perspectives are we still missing?

Documents

Document A

Perham, M. (1937). *Native Administration in Nigeria*. London: Oxford University Press.

Document B

The Testimony of Nwanyoji, March 14, 1930. In *The Women's War of 1929* by Toyin Falola and Adam Paddock. Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2011. pp. 280-281.