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“Active Methods of Showing Dislike” Colonial Resistance in Warri Province, 1927

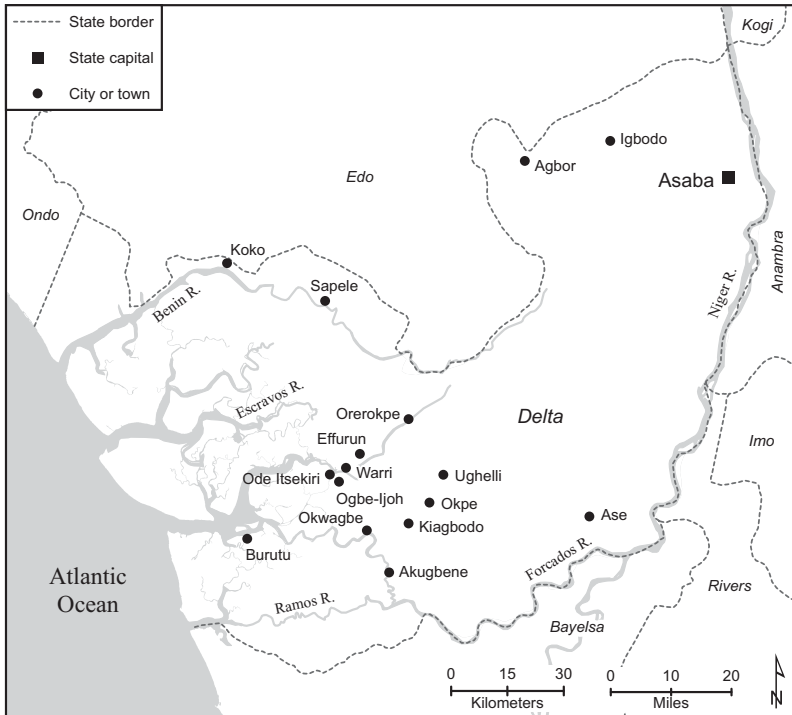


Figure 1.1 Current map of Delta State (retaining the former boundaries of Warri Province).¹

In October 1927, the British colonial government’s headquarters in Lagos received reports of disturbances that had erupted in Warri Province between August and September. According to the reports,

¹ The original boundaries of Warri Province have been retained by Delta State in the present (2025).

people throughout the province – from the increasingly metropolitan centers of Warri and Sapele to the outlying towns and trading posts of Effurun and Jeremi – were agitated over the prospect of a new direct taxation policy. The colonial government planned to extend the Native Revenue Ordinance – which had already been applied in the northern provinces since 1906 and the southwestern provinces between 1917 and 1920 – to the remaining southern provinces the following year, in April 1928.² Niger Delta communities, in Warri Province (on the western side of the delta), as well as in Owerri, Onitsha, Ogoja, and Calabar Provinces to the east, confronted British efforts to introduce a new tax regime in this region with resistance and boycott. In Warri, specifically, people from the major communities – Itsekiri, Urhobo, Ijaw, Isoko, and Western Igbo – responded by coordinating and participating in a multitiered boycott of the palm oil trade.

The 1927 Warri boycott, and especially a series of protests that turned violent, marks a pivotal shift in the attitude of the peoples and communities in Warri Province toward the colonial state as their dislike transitioned to active dissent. Indeed, the district officer of Warri Division, T. J. Southern, observed this shift at the time, reporting that “the outstanding event of the year 1927 was the attitude of the Natives with regard to the new taxation law. . . . At first the people were merely passive [in their boycott], but as time went on adopted more active methods of showing their dislike of this new law.”³ This shift to “more active methods” of colonial resistance is significant for what it discloses about the history of “minority communities” in Warri and the Niger Delta more broadly. First, in the 1920s, delta communities were not defined by “ethnic rivalry”; rather, the Warri boycott provides important evidence of a working alliance between these communities, who were grappling with rapid economic and political change, especially as it affected the palm oil economy, in the 1920s. This episode in Warri history goes against the master narrative of internal,

² A. E. Afigbo, *The Warrant Chiefs: Indirect Rule in Southeastern Nigeria, 1891–1929* (New York: Humanities Press, 1972), 207; Ben Naanen, “‘You Are Demanding Tax from the Dead’: The Introduction of Direct Taxation and Its Aftermath in South-Eastern Nigeria, 1928–39,” *African Economic History* 34 (2006): 70.

³ T. J. Southern, report, February 16, 1928, 1, in folder *Nigeria, Annual Report, Warri Province: 1927*, WP 3/9-201/27 (Warri), National Archives of Nigeria, Ibadan (hereafter cited as NANI).

primordial ethnic conflicts that have come to define the history of the western Niger Delta. Second, the colonial response to resistance in the late 1920s, starting with the Warri boycotts, aimed to erode the sense of affinity and common cause between these communities by encouraging competition for scarce colonial resources over time. Direct taxation was a key mechanism to foster this competition. And third, the British government identified each community as having varying degrees of willingness to collaborate with the colonial state, creating a hierarchy of favoritism among local communities that would inform their approach to taxation and local governance in the following decade.

In the immediate aftermath of the boycott, it had become clear to government officials that taxation was not actually the central grievance among Niger Delta communities; rather, it was the corrupt and artificial native administrative system of indirect rule, which the British government imposed on them through government-appointed warrant chiefs, that these communities most resented. This political grievance combined with mounting economic stress through the mid-1920s, as the global depression following World War I made people's livelihoods increasingly unreliable. Farmers, porters, and traders struggled to purchase imported items, much less basic local goods as commodity prices on the global market fluctuated rapidly. The palm oil economy, which had been lucrative for Niger Delta communities since the middle of the nineteenth century, was in decline, and the prospect of a new tax deepened the collective anxiety and distrust toward the colonial state. The taxation crisis was the puncture that released long-building pressure in a fragile, volatile palm-producing economy.

British officials and their African intermediaries (warrant chiefs, the local police force, and a lean cadre of municipal clerks) strove to balance a rapidly changing and unstable political economy. The fact that warrant chiefs, who had gained a reputation for being abusive and corrupt, would enforce this new tax policy added insult to injury. Long-standing local quarrels over political authority erupted during the boycott, further complicating an already fraught situation. Imperial imperatives to govern and extract revenue interfaced poorly with local struggles over livelihoods, autonomy, and power. As such, colonial states were continually in crisis, having to impose different regimes of control (the warrant chiefs, native courts, taxation, and policing) to satisfy an ever-elusive sense of order and stability. These regimes of control were also supposed to help reduce the discrepancies between governing theories

and real policies, which played out in messy, uneven, and often violent ways on the ground.⁴ This fragility and lack of coherence in British governing policy often exposed a high level of ignorance among British administrators about the local communities they sought to govern.⁵ The 1927 Warri boycott demonstrates this powerfully.

The Warri boycott was part of a larger, if scattered wave of resistance to colonial state expansion and entrenchment in the late 1920s. It is difficult to find explanations in the broader scholarship on colonial resistance in this region for why people in Warri were so quick to respond this way to this form of colonial intervention. In fact, Warri is usually only mentioned in passing in extant histories of the 1920s, which focus more on the remarkable 1929 Aba Women's War (*Ogu Omunwaanyi*) in Owerri Province.⁶ The Aba Women's War is the

⁴ George Balandier, "The Colonial Situation: A Theoretical Approach," trans. Immanuel Wallerstein, in *Social Change: The Colonial Situation*, ed. Immanuel Wallerstein (New York: Wiley, 1966), 34–61.

⁵ Frederick Cooper, *Africa Since 1940: The Past of the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 5; A. H. M. Kirk-Greene, "The Thin White Line: The Size of the British Colonial Service in Africa," *African Affairs* 79, no. 314 (1980): 25–44; Sara Berry, "Hegemony on a Shoestring: Indirect Rule and Access to Agricultural Land," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 62, no. 3 (1992): 327–55.

⁶ One of the main texts investigating the conditions that led to the Aba Women's War – Harry A. Gailey's *The Road to Aba* – mentions Warri in passing and does not link the 1927 boycott to the 1929 uprising in Aba. He marked 1927 as a critical moment for British administrators' recognition that these southern provinces needed more study without discussing why that year – 1927 – was so significant. Later in the book, he mentioned the Warri boycott, but he characterized it as a "slight" disturbance despite citing the loss of life and heavy police presence for the duration of the boycott. See Harry A. Gailey, *The Road to Aba: A Study of British Administrative Policy in Eastern Nigeria* (New York: New York University Press, 1970), 20, 90–91. A. E. Afigbo, who devoted much of his scholarship to the warrant chief system, and early colonial imposition in southeastern Nigeria, acknowledged Warri alongside the other eastern provinces, but treated it as peripheral to the main theater of resistance in Owerri and Calabar Provinces. See, for example, Afigbo, *The Warrant Chiefs*, which is a culmination of shorter pieces he wrote on this subject. This peripheral treatment is reproduced in Ben Naanen's more recent work on anti-tax protest, where he offered a rare and bizarre comment directly on the Warri boycott, explaining that the "1927 anti-tax revolt was rooted in grievances against the native court system and the rising wave of ethnic nationalism among the Urhobo." He goes on to provide a simplified account of Urhobo-Itsekiri relations, which developed in the decade after the boycott. Naanen's explanation ultimately does not offer much insight into why Warri Province was one of the first to launch overt protest against the new taxation scheme. It also falls prey to the standard focus on the

most striking visible episode of a protracted struggle against colonial state entrenchment we have in the historical record for this region. The main body of scholarship on the Women’s War, produced contemporaneously and up until the early 1970s, posits that it was either a reaction to the new tax policy, which disproportionately affected women in the southeastern provinces, or an eruption of deep resentment toward the corrupt warrant chief system they had endured for two decades.⁷ Subsequent scholarship – mostly feminist, anthropological, and indigenously produced – has offered more nuanced perspectives on the cultural inputs of the 1929 crisis. These more recent scholars argue that the Igbo and Ibibio women who participated in the Women’s War were responding to years of economic instability, as well as the increasingly visible colonial state and active missionary presence in the region since formal conquest in 1914. Additionally, the warring women were likely extending their resistance to the colonial state’s expansion of male authority over the local and regional economies in which women’s labor and trade activities were central. The women who participated in the Women’s War believed the colonial state had conspired with Igbo men to finally usurp their political, economic, and spiritual power.⁸

primacy and endemic nature of ethnic tension between the Itsekiri people and their neighbors. Naanen, “You Are Demanding Tax from the Dead,” 78.

⁷ Nigeria, *Report of the Commission of Inquiry Appointed to Inquire Into the Disturbances in the Calabar and Owerri Provinces, December 1929* (Lagos: Government Printer, 1930); Margery Perham, “The Census of Nigeria, 1931,” *Africa* 6, no. 4 (1933): 417–18; A. E. Afigbo, “Revolution and Reaction in Eastern Nigeria, 1900–1929 (The Background of the Women’s Riot of 1929),” *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 3, no. 3 (1966): 539–57; Afigbo, *The Warrant Chiefs*; Gailey, *The Road to Aba*; Sylvia Leith-Ross, *African Women: A Study of the Ibo of Nigeria* (1939; repr., New York: F. A. Praeger, 1965).

⁸ Caroline Ifeka-Moller, “Female Militancy and Colonial Revolt: The Women’s War of 1929, Eastern Nigeria,” in *Perceiving Women*, ed. Shirley Ardener (New York: Wiley, 1975), 127–54; Nina Emma Mba, *Nigerian Women Mobilized: Women’s Political Activity in Southern Nigeria, 1900–1965* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1982); Ekwere Otu Akpan and Violetta I. Ekpo, *The Women’s War of 1929: A Popular Uprising in South Eastern Nigeria (Preliminary Study)* (Calabar: Government Printer, 1988); Misty L. Bastian, “Dancing Women and Colonial Men: The Nwaobiola of 1925,” in “Wicked” *Women and the Reconfiguration of Gender in Africa*, ed. Dorothy L. Hodgson and Sheryl L. McCurdy (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2001): 109–29; Gloria Chuku, *Igbo Women and Economic Transformation in Southeastern Nigeria, 1900–1960* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

We do not have a comparably rich body of historical or ethnographic scholarship to precisely show how Warri boycotters perceived the colonial state at the time of the boycott, but the evidence suggests the colonial state posed a threat to their livelihood and their political autonomy. These events – the 1927 Warri boycott and the 1929 Aba Women’s War – must be read alongside each other to form a fuller picture of colonial resistance in the Niger Delta in the 1920s. As the scholarship on Aba has become more nuanced, we should apply the same care in our appraisal of the Warri boycott, working to understand the uniquely local dynamics that informed people’s perception of what was at stake in Warri Province in 1927. Even as we do so, it is important to view all these events not as singular and isolated but as a constellation of responses to colonial entrenchment informed by a shared political economy that was in crisis.

I begin this chapter by looking at how Warri residents working at different points in the palm oil supply chain coordinated a general boycott that they hoped would force the colonial government to withdraw the new tax scheme. In fact, palm oil production had drawn people from different ethnic backgrounds in this region together, forging the networks used to coordinate and organize the boycott and, later, the protests. I then examine how the protests, triggered by the government’s tax propaganda, revealed deeper anticolonial grievances with native administration, namely the native courts and warrant chiefs, whom British officials viewed as indispensable to securing their economic interests and who, thus, in many cases, invented their authority. Residents throughout the Niger Delta viewed these African colonial agents as illegitimate arbiters of authority. The British government was invested in viewing the ethnic communities in the Niger Delta as discrete communities rather than an integrated social network connected by the palm oil economy. The warrant chiefs, whom the government relied on to manage the coordinated boycott and protests in response to the new tax, proved incapable of delivering a peaceful resolution. In the third section, I examine how officials persisted with their faith in the principles of indirect rule despite evidence, first, that Warri communities viewed the warrant chiefs as illegitimate and, second, that they were thus ineffective colonial agents. Colonial administrators insisted that the social, economic, and political worlds of Africans in the Niger Delta were easily understood with reference only to ethnicity and that the “tribal” logic that undergirded these worlds

would form the basis for dismantling their resistance against the colonial state. These assumptions would ultimately inform the British government’s strategy to reorganize these local communities to align with the administrative structures they had established in other parts of Nigeria.

Colonial Economies: The Palm Oil Trade and the Warri Boycott

The boycott of the palm oil trade was already underway in Warri Province when F. M. Baddeley, chief secretary of the colony, arrived in Sapele on September 27, 1927. He had been conducting a pro-taxation propaganda tour throughout the southeastern provinces, starting in the east, in Calabar and Owerri Provinces, and ending in Warri Province before he returned to Lagos by boat. Even though communities east of the Niger River did not welcome the idea of direct taxation, he wrote: “The demeanour of the [Calabar] Chiefs . . . was on the whole satisfactory. . . . It is particularly satisfactory to be able to report in these terms on Calabar, for it was in that Province that the most determined opposition was expected.”⁹ Baddeley had expected the “most determined opposition” there because Calabar and Owerri Provinces were at the heart of the palm-oil-producing region, and global palm prices had been fluctuating unpredictably in the preceding years, provoking widespread economic anxiety and uncertainty. Producer prices and income had dropped significantly after the start of World War I, suffering a major hit in 1921–22, from which they never fully recovered (see Table 1.1). British officials also expected more discontent in Calabar and Owerri Provinces because the market women in that area launched a protest in 1925, known as the *Nwaobiala*, or the “Dancing Women’s Uprising,” which significantly disrupted palm oil production and trade.¹⁰

Implementing the taxation policy required careful calculation to avoid further disrupting the still lucrative but volatile palm oil trade. However, it was on the fringe of this economy – in Warri Province – where British officials first encountered strong resistance to the new tax policy.

⁹ F. M. Baddeley to L. C. M. S. Amery (Secretary of State for the colonies), October 20, 1927, 2, in Nigeria, *Disturbance at Sapele in Warri Province*, CO 583/154/4, National Archives, London, UK (hereafter cited as NAUK).

¹⁰ Bastian, “Dancing Women and Colonial Men.”

Table 1.1 *Palm oil and kernel prices and incomes, 1919–38*

	Palm oil prices and incomes					Palm kernel prices and incomes				
	Producer Price (£/ton)	Producer Income (PI) (£ 000's)	Consumer Price Index (CPI)	Real Producer Price Index (RPPI)	Real Producer Income Index (RPII)	Producer Price (£/ton)	Producer Income (PI) (£ 000's)	Consumer Price Index (CPI)	Real Producer Price Index (RPPI)	Real Producer Income Index (RPII)
1919	43.9	4,432	53.1	234.5	192.5	23.6	5,119	53.1	211.7	145.2
1920	42.3	3,589	78.9	152.1	104.9	25.9	5,362	78.9	156.3	102.4
1921	17.7	934	67.5	74.4	31.9	11.7	1,794	67.5	82.5	40.0
1922	21.7	1,901	44.7	137.8	98.0	11.0	1,966	44.7	117.2	66.2
1923	23.6	2,347	43.9	152.6	123.2	12.9	2,879	43.9	139.9	98.9
1924	25.8	3,279	46.8	156.4	161.5	14.8	3,742	46.8	150.4	120.5
1925	26.1	3,337	44.7	165.3	172.3	15.2	4,148	44.7	162.0	139.8
1926	24.3	2,747	43.0	160.0	147.2	14.1	3,500	43.0	155.6	122.6
1927	22.5	2,543	38.1	167.2	153.8	14.3	3,678	38.1	178.7	145.4
1928	24.2	3,076	39.0	176.2	181.8	15.4	3,798	39.0	187.9	146.7
1929	23.7	3,118	39.0	172.1	184.4	13.4	3,370	39.0	163.6	130.3
1930	16.0	2,173	36.0	126.1	139.2	9.2	2,366	36.0	121.1	98.9
1931	6.3	745	31.0	57.7	55.5	9.2	2,328	31.0	140.6	113.2
1932	9.6	1,114	27.6	98.6	93.1	7.2	2,225	27.6	124.3	121.4

Table 1.1 (*cont.*)

Palm oil prices and incomes						Palm kernel prices and incomes				
Producer Price (£/ton)	Producer Income (PI) (£ 000's)	Consumer Price Index (CPI)	Real Producer Price Index (RPPI)	Real Producer Income Index (RPII)		Producer Price (£/ton)	Producer Income (PI) (£ 000's)	Consumer Price Index (CPI)	Real Producer Price Index (RPPI)	Real Producer Income Index (RPII)
1933	7.0	901	27.9	71.3	74.6	4.9	1,274	27.9	83.5	68.8
1934	5.0	558	27.0	51.9	47.8	3.6	1,042	27.0	63.3	58.1
1935	11.4	1,626	27.4	117.9	136.9	16.7	1,845	27.4	290.1	101.5
1936	10.6	1,725	27.9	107.9	142.7	6.4	30.2	2,452	108.2	132.3
1937	13.4	1,953	30.0	126.7	150.0	9.2	3,107	30.0	146.0	156.6
1938	6.4	706	30.0	60.7	54.3	5.5	1,716	30.0	87.3	86.3
1948	35.25	4,336	100	100	100	21	6,638.1	100	100	100

Note: The table covers the period from just after World War I to the end of the period of administrative reorganization of local district and divisional units in the five southeastern provinces. Source: Gerald. K. Helleiner, *Peasant Agriculture, Government, and Economic Growth in Nigeria* (Homewood, IL: Richard D. Irwin, 1966), Statistical Appendix, Table II-B-2, B-3. Formula: where 1948 = 100 for CPI, RPI, and RPII, (PI / PI in 1948) / (CPI / CPI in 1948) × 100 = RPII. Note the volatility in real producer prices and incomes over time, with major dips during the Great Depression and in the years of intense administrative reorganization. Ironically, prices were on their way to recovery in the years of unrest (1927–29).

Protests began in the summer of 1927, as district and provincial officers began compiling nominal rolls to prepare for the implementation of the new tax ordinance, which would take effect in April 1928. Beyond the primary grievance against the direct tax, various rumors circulated about government plans to convert locally owned palm groves into government-owned large-scale plantations, a new licensing tax on the local liquor trade, and even the possibility of a three-year postmortem tax.¹¹ The fear of a government-run plantation scheme was particularly potent, as it was grounded in real policy trends that were playing out in other palm-producing regions like the Congo and Malaysia, where plantation production had begun to overtake West African peasant production.

Although the British policy of trusteeship in West Africa was conservative compared to their land alienation policies in east and southern Africa, Urhobo fears about land alienation grew in response to a long-running government obsession to increase the efficiency and volume of palm oil production. Immediately after World War I, the Anglo-Dutch corporation Unilever, in a bid to expand palm oil production in British African territories, attempted to convince the colonial government in Nigeria to sequester land for large-scale plantations. Unilever already owned one of the two large palm kernel processing factories in the Niger Delta. Along with other oil manufacturers in England, Unilever argued that the traditional, peasant-controlled system was inefficient due to the erratic volume of produce delivered from year to year: the palm trees in Nigeria were semi-wild and were subject to more variable environmental conditions than would be found in a controlled plantation setting. The Nigerian government argued that staying with peasant production was better, especially given the persistent drop in price through the 1920s. Yields could be improved, according to Frederick Dyke, a technical officer affiliated with the oil trading firms in the 1920s, through the introduction of mechanized processing, something oil companies were willing to invest in, but African farmers were hesitant to embrace.¹²

¹¹ Obaro Ikime, "The Anti-Tax Riots in Warri Province, 1927–1928," *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 3, no. 3 (1966): 561–62; Nigeria, *Annual Report on the Southern Provinces and Colony of Nigeria for the Year 1927* (Lagos: Government Printer, 1928), 76.

¹² Frederick Dyke, *Report on the Oil Palm Industry in British West Africa* (Lagos: Government Printer, 1927).

Adopting a plantation economy for palm oil would also create a class of landless laborers who would be unemployed if the plantation scheme failed. Granting land to Europeans in this densely populated region would create a complex series of legal and political problems that the British government were not willing to engage.¹³ Despite the fact that British anxieties over land alienation aligned with those of African producers in this instance, Unilever’s propaganda in Nigeria must have made a significant impression on local producers and traders. The new head tax would have reinforced people’s fear of eventually losing their access to land, as their autonomy and livelihood had already suffered significant assault since World War I. The official effort to create tax rolls triggered the protests in the summer of 1927, and eventually led to a consequential meeting between Itsekiri and Urhobo leaders at the end of July in Igbudu, a village two miles south of Warri Township.

Eda Otuedon, an Itsekiri professional letter writer who came from one of the ruling Itsekiri houses, mobilized a significant faction of Itsekiri leaders who opposed the authority of Chief Dore Numa – a British appointed warrant chief – to attend the meeting, and Oshue, an Urhobo trader from Obodo (near Effurun), brought with him representatives from the fourteen Urhobo clans.¹⁴ This group of men agreed to launch a boycott of the palm trade: farmers would stop selling their palm produce and oil to the local European firms; local pilots and porters would abandon the docks; and women would reduce palm production to supply only the local trade and consumption of palm oil. They shut down the native courts and closed the markets to European trade in foodstuff. Anyone who broke the rules of the boycott would suffer steep fines and a potential beating.¹⁵

By taking such extreme measures, the boycotters hoped the loss of trade would force European merchants to exert pressure on the government to withdraw the new tax policy.¹⁶ For the boycott to work,

¹³ David Meredith, “Government and the Decline of the Nigerian Oil-Palm Export Industry, 1919–1939,” *Journal of African History* 25, no. 3 (1984): 311–12.

¹⁴ Baddeley to Amery, November 16, 1927, 2, in Nigeria, *Disturbance at Sapele*, CO 583/154/4, NAUK.

¹⁵ Southern, report, February 16, 1928, 1, in folder “Nigeria, Annual Report, Warri Province: 1927,” WP 3/9-201/27 (Warri), NANI.

¹⁶ Baddeley to Amery, October 20, 1927, 2, in Nigeria, *Disturbance at Sapele*, CO 583/154/4, NAUK. The major firms doing business in this region – in Warri, Forcados, and Burutu – were British, and included the Royal Niger Company

leaders of the boycott relied on the collaboration and coordination of Warri communities, each contributing to different niches in the palm oil economy. This coordination is remarkable because it contradicts the defining popular (local, national, and international) narrative about the historical relationship between the Itsekiri people and their neighbors: that they have been locked in a long, perennial tribal feud.¹⁷

Warri's process of urbanization in the early colonial period might explain the nature of cross-ethnic collaboration. The urban centers in Warri Province – Warri and Sapele – had become metropolitan and ethnically heterogeneous by the 1920s. Key European firms like Bey and Zimmer, Elder Dempster, John Holt, and the United Africa Company either headquartered in these cities or used their ports as terminals for their operations. Additionally, Warri was the original seat of colonial government for the Central Province in 1906, when Southern Nigeria was still a protectorate; then it became the capital city of Warri Province after the 1914 amalgamation. These cities hosted government workers from different parts of the colony, as well as people linked to the missionary schools and the various service industries tied to the colonial economy. Between 1921 and 1931, Warri went from approximately 2,300 people to 11,000.¹⁸ The rapid growth of Warri and Sapele is largely explained by the British

(owned by Lever Brothers since 1920), Elder Dempster, and John Holt. These firms had long been connected to the palm oil trade in this region and exerted significant influence on colonial economic policy in this region, which was previously known as the Oil Rivers Protectorate. Ayodeji Olukoju, "Anatomy of Business-Government Relations: Fiscal Policy and Mercantile Pressure Group Activity in Nigeria, 1916–1933," *African Studies Review* 38, no. 1 (1995): 23–50; Marika Sherwood, "Elder Dempster and West Africa, 1891–c.1940: The Genesis of Underdevelopment?" *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 30, no. 2 (1997): 253–76.

¹⁷ Scholars, however, are clear that the origins of this dynamic are rooted in the colonial period. See, for example, Ikime, "Anti-Tax Riots"; Obaro Ikime, *Niger Delta Rivalry: Itsekiri-Urhobo Relations and the European Presence, 1884–1936* (New York: Humanities Press, 1969); John Boye Ejibowah, "Who Owns the Oil? The Politics of Ethnicity in the Niger Delta of Nigeria," *Africa Today* 47, no. 1 (2000): 29–47; and Peter Ekeh, ed., *Warri City and British Colonial Rule in the Western Niger Delta* (Buffalo, NY: Urhobo Historical Society, 2004).

¹⁸ P. C. Lloyd, "Ethnicity and the Structure of Inequality in a Nigerian Town in the Mid-1950s," in *Urban Ethnicity*, ed. Abner Cohen (London: Tavistock Publications, 1974), 227–29.

government designating them the provincial hubs for colonial business, which centered on the palm oil trade.

Towns like Effurun, Jeremi, Forcados, and Burutu maintained their role as trading outposts within this political economy, which was established in the nineteenth century and connected to European trading firms, around which the palm oil economy revolved. These firms drew labor from the nearby indigenous communities, each of which occupied a different niche in the palm oil economy. The Ijaw communities resided in small enclaves throughout the intricate system of rivers and creeks traversing the Niger River delta. They primarily engaged in fishing as their main economic activity, but they also served as river pilots who transported palm oil from the farms further inland, to the interior forests. Urhobo, Isoko, and Western Igbo communities, who occupied the forested areas, were largely farmers, producing subsistence crops as well as the valuable palm fruit cash crop. The Itsekiri were coastal communities, long occupying an intermediary niche between the coast and the hinterland as fishermen and brokers for the palm trade with the European trading firms. Previously, they traded slaves with Europeans and had therefore cultivated a stronger relationship with them, relative to other local communities in this region. Despite these economic niches, these communities were highly interdependent, often living side by side, intermarrying and sharing many of the same cultural practices.¹⁹ This fluidity and interdependence enabled the success of the boycott, stopping all parts of the interlocking economy of the palm trade.²⁰

¹⁹ Ikime, *Niger Delta Rivalry*. Observations in the field – from my childhood, family history, and through fieldwork carried out between 2005 and 2007 – inform my understanding of the relationships between these groups. For the ethnographic literature that exists on these groups, see John Waddington Hubbard, *The Sobo of the Niger Delta: A Work Dealing with the History and Languages of the People Inhabiting the Sobo (Urhobo) Division, Warri Province, Southern Nigeria, and the Geography of Their Land* (Zaria: Gaskiya Corporation, 1948); Arthur Glyn Leonard, *The Lower Niger and Its Tribes* (London: Macmillan, 1906), 18–19; R. E. Bradbury, *The Benin Kingdom and the Edo-Speaking Peoples of South-Western Nigeria: the Benin Kingdom; The Ishan; The Northern Edo; The Urhobo and Isoko of the Niger Delta. Together with a Section on the “Itsekiri”* by P. C. Lloyd (London: Routledge, 1957); and P. C. Lloyd, “The Itsekiri in the Nineteenth Century: An Outline Social History,” *Journal of African History* 4, no. 2 (1963): 207–31.

²⁰ Southern, report, February 16, 1928, 1, in folder “Nigeria, Annual Report, Warri Province: 1927,” WP 3/9-201/27 (Warri), NANI.

Baddeley's tour report offers a glimpse into the nature and scale of coordinated resistance in Warri Province in its early phase (July through the end of September). Shortly after the planning meeting in Igbudu, protesters in Kwale damaged the district officer M. de la Mothe's car as he struggled to leave an informational meeting, and several warrant chiefs were "beaten within an inch of their lives" when they defied the boycott by attempting to reopen the native courts. Hundreds of people in each of the smaller towns of Jeremi and Ajayube in Warri Division turned out from August through September to oppose and intimidate district officers and warrant chiefs when they tried to hold informational meetings.²¹

When Baddeley arrived in Warri on September 28 to meet with the chiefs, continuing his propaganda campaign, a "considerable" crowd met him there. Although the meeting with the chiefs over the necessity of taxation was contentious, it was peaceful. The scene outside that meeting was another matter. Thousands of Warri townspeople gathered to meet him as he departed. The crowd surrounded his car shouting, and some carried sticks. They overwhelmed the police, who were largely unarmed. Neither the police nor Baddeley could move for some time, until the crowd allowed his entourage to move slowly away without harm to body or property.²²

Although there was no physical violence in Warri, people in other jurisdictions did not show the same constraint. On September 30, at his final stop in Sapele, Baddeley's propaganda tour reached a dramatic climax. While conducting a large public meeting to explain taxation, an agitated man called Akpoeva accused him of being a liar. Akpoeva continued to shout accusations, even throwing himself to the floor cursing at one point during the meeting. Meanwhile, a crowd of "about one thousand persons" gathered at the native court after shutting down the main market and cutting the telegraph line between Sapele and Kwale. Most of these protesters were Sapele residents, who Major G. H. Walker, the acting inspector general of police, identified

²¹ Southern, report, February 16, 1928, 1, NANI. See also Ikime, "Anti-Tax Riots," 562; and Baddeley, *Enclosure No. 3 to Nigeria, Confidential Dispatch of 20 October 1927*, 1, CO 583/154/4, NAUK.

²² Baddeley to Amery, November 16, 1927, 4, in Nigeria, *Disturbance at Sapele*, CO 583/154/4, NAUK.

as largely “Ukpe Sobos” (Okpe Urhobos).²³ When a group of police attempted to arrest “a protester” (likely Akpoeva), the crowd attacked and injured several police officers. Baddeley barely escaped the crowd, immediately abandoning his tour to return to Lagos.²⁴

Major Walker and his fellow policemen struggled to calm the protesters in the wake of Baddeley’s departure, as the protests continued. They dispersed people with batons and at that juncture Walker authorized forty-five rounds of ammunition to be used in case of an overt threat. Shortly thereafter, an estimated four hundred men rushed the police station with sticks and “heavy pieces of wood,” throwing “missiles” as they charged. Walker instructed the twelve overwhelmed policemen to “fire over the heads of the crowd” to disperse the protesters. However, the police fired a few rounds into the crowd, killing one of the protesters and injuring three. Walker and his men sustained only minor injuries in this violent exchange.²⁵

Authority, Forced Labor, and Resentment

The grievances behind the boycott were more nuanced than British officials suggested in their reports. More than taxation, chieftaincy was a deeply contested category of authority in this region at the time of the protest. It was not a stable, much less universally accepted, political category among Warri communities, and “native authority,” as we have come to learn, was viewed with suspicion because of the abuses enacted in the warrant chief system. In addition, the long-term economic instability caused by World War I and the global recession rendered these communities especially vulnerable. Direct taxation was the bond tying widespread resentment of the warrant chiefs with economic uncertainty. It threatened to remove the last vestige of autonomy and control people had over their livelihoods. Economic

²³ G. H. Walker, inspector-general of police, Southern Provinces to the secretary of the Southern Provinces, Lagos, October 20, 1927, 1 and 5–6, enclosure no. 2, in Nigeria, *Disturbance at Sapele*, CO 583/154/4/35–40, NAUK. Okpe Urhobos primarily settled in the Sapele area, which is west of Warri Township, around the seventeenth century. See Adogbeji Salubi, “The Origins of Sapele Township,” *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 2, no. 1 (1960): 115–31.

²⁴ Baddeley to Amery, November 16, 1927, 1–2, CO 583/154/4, NAUK.

²⁵ Walker to the secretary of the Southern Provinces, October 20, 1927, 3, CO 583/154/4/35–40, NAUK; Baddeley to Amery, telegram, October 8, 1927, in Nigeria, *Disturbance at Sapele*, CO 583/154/4/44, NAUK.

concern and political threat were tightly intertwined motivations for the trade boycott.

Taxation sought to enumerate the value of property and household revenue people supposedly gained from the palm trade. However, it was not the general idea of taxation that people in this region objected to; taxation was not a new concept. People had been paying different forms of indirect tax on goods (import taxes and custom duties on luxury and manufactured items) since at least the 1890s. Rather, Warri communities were concerned about *how* taxes would be assessed. They understood this new tax as a kind of income tax, and they suspected it would expand bondage practices based on their previous experience with the colonial state because they anticipated the hardship of generating the funds to pay such taxes in a climate of economic insecurity. These palm oil producers, traders, porters, and market women saw this tax as a direct incursion on their basic livelihood and political autonomy.²⁶ This was an intensification of the government's presence – a tangible, existential threat – in line with the threat of harassment and control already being imposed by the warrant chiefs.

Empires were affirmed and reasserted with greater vigor in the interwar period, when metropolitan economies struggled under the weight of economic recession in the 1920s. This led to a real dependence on the productivity of the colonies, which were viewed as extensions of metropolitan economies – a clear, intimate entanglement. Viewed as a means to alleviate metropolitan shortfalls, the colonies became critical fields of extraction, which demanded disciplined African workers and taxpayers. Local African agents – chiefs, clerks, and educated elites – became indispensable agents, working on behalf of the colonial state to control and maximize the productivity of colonial economies. Making colonial economies more efficient and profitable for metropolitan interests, especially during times of war, required concerted effort in policy and administration.²⁷ Taxation and the implementation of a compliant native administration intensified after Governor Lugard made this the driving imperative with his now-famous volume *The Dual Mandate in Tropical Africa* (1922). This

²⁶ A. E. Afigbo, "The Native Revenue Ordinance in the Eastern Provinces: The Adventures of a Colonial Legislative Measure," in *Studies in Southern Nigerian History*, ed. Boniface I. Obichere (London: Frank Cass, 1982).

²⁷ Frederick Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

theory of governance – indirect rule – inspired greater confidence among governing officials to reorganize African communities into neatly bound “tribal” units that could, the thinking went, be governed more efficiently by local African agents.²⁸

The Native Authority Ordinance of 1916, along with the Native Revenue Ordinance (also established in 1916), first applied to the major Yoruba municipalities of Oyo, Abeokuta, Egba, and Ibadan, as well as non-Yoruba Benin. These communities already had in place some form of paramount chieftaincy and a tributary system comparable to that in the northern emirates, which the colonial state could tap into to rule indirectly. However, the peoples in the rest of the southern provinces – Warri Province and the four provinces east of the Niger River – did not have traditions of paramount chieftaincy, which would have made the extension of indirect rule to those provinces a more seamless exercise. What had been operating in the five south-central and southeastern provinces since the middle of the nineteenth century was a loose and uneven native court system that initially developed as a mediating institution between European and local traders to ensure the peaceful and secure flow of trade. Local traders sat with European firm representatives in council to settle trade disputes and claims, as well as make trade agreements.²⁹ Starting in 1891, prominent town headmen (many were descendants of the wealthy nineteenth-century trade merchants who had collaborated closely with the European trade firms) were granted warrants, authorized by British consuls, to exercise executive, legislative, and judicial functions over their local constituents. These warrant chiefs sat at the head of the native councils that managed the native courts, overseeing the day-to-day business of one or more communities, collecting fines associated with claims and disputes, both domestic and business-related.

²⁸ Further confidence came from their experience implementing indirect rule in the northern provinces (particularly in the Middle Belt region of Nigeria), using the northern emirates as proxies to implement taxation and impose new administrative rules. See Moses Ochonu, *Colonialism by Proxy: Hausa Imperial Agents and Middle Belt Consciousness in Nigeria* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2014). See also Benjamin N. Lawrence, Emily Lynn Osborn, and Richard L. Roberts, eds., *Intermediaries, Interpreters, and Clerks: African Employees in the Making of Colonial Africa* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006) for a broader treatment of this critical class of local collaborators in colonial Africa.

²⁹ Afigbo, *The Warrant Chiefs*, 38–40.

Chiefly authority, as a category, was also deeply entwined with colonial violence and coercion in the minds of Niger Delta communities. Chiefs therefore lacked legitimacy. These communities already construed the practice of extracting labor as a form of taxation, as it had been articulated as such in the early colonial period. Furthermore, it was not far removed from the practice of human pawning or slavery. The British government often used the native courts to recruit young men (with the help of the warrant chiefs) to build roads and bridges with little to no compensation. Forced labor was one of the ways the British government imposed an indirect tax on Niger Delta communities prior to the late 1920s. This was a well-tested strategy to administer their vast territories cheaply.³⁰ Forced labor was deeply unpopular among these communities and contributed to their resentment of the warrant chiefs. Since administrative oversight by colonial officials was quite thin to nonexistent in many rural towns and villages, colonial intermediaries like the warrant chiefs, court clerks, and public works officials exercised considerable power and control over local populations. They often used their position as arbiters of justice to bribe and extort labor or money from vulnerable people, and in the process, they were able to amass wealth and robust client bases.³¹

The colonial state's impoverished understanding of this region and its communities triggered historical anxieties about freedom and autonomy when it used ill-advised language to promote their propaganda about taxation and governance. The terms British officers used to approximate the meaning of taxation – *osa unyovwi* (Urhobo), *osa uzuo* (Isoko), *inwe origbo* (Itsekiri), *tebese* (Ijaw) – were all literally translated in these languages as “a fee paid on the head.” People understood a “head tax” as being equivalent to paying a redemption fee to free oneself from bondage (either from being enslaved or from peonage/debt bondage). Slavery provided the social foundation on which the lucrative palm oil trade intensified in this region in the nineteenth century, supporting the rise of the merchant princes and the palm trading houses.³² Slavery and various forms of peonage were

³⁰ Kirk-Greene, “The Thin White Line”; Berry, “Hegemony on a Shoestring.”

³¹ Afigbo, *The Warrant Chiefs*, 187–93. See also Lawrence, Osborn, and Roberts, *Intermediaries, Interpreters, and Clerks*.

³² Kenneth O. Dike, *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta, 1830–1885: An Introduction to the Economic and Political History of Nigeria* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956); Obaro Ikime, *Merchant Prince of the Niger Delta: The*

still thriving social institutions in the Niger Delta in the 1920s, and they lingered well into the 1930s because of the increased economic pressures introduced by taxation, colonial labor demands, and the Great Depression's impact on palm prices.³³ The British only really began to systematically enforce the abolition of the Nigerian internal slave trade in the 1930s.³⁴ Although slavery was not practiced at nineteenth-century levels, falling prey to enslavement – most likely through pawnship – was still common. It was considered an insult to imply that a free person redeems themselves in a way that a slave would, especially when the institution was alive and well in the late 1920s. In short, the language being used to sell the idea of new taxation doomed it to failure. Moreover, it exacerbated the collective anxiety Niger Delta communities already felt because of economic insecurity.

Rise and Fall of Nana Olomu (London: Heinemann Educational, 1968); Ebiegberi J. Alagoa, *The Small Brave City-States: A History of Nembe-Brass in the Niger Delta* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1964).

³³ Robin Chapdeleine, *The Persistence of Slavery: An Economic History of Child Trafficking in Nigeria* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2021).

³⁴ Enforcing the illegality of slavery in Nigeria was coupled with the implementation of the new tax scheme, and the timing of these changes corresponded with an international agreement to shift away from the use of forced labor in the 1926 League of Nations Slavery Convention. Frederick Lugard, a principal architect of indirect rule in Nigeria, was a key advocate for this shift at the League of Nations, which increased the pressure on colonial administrators to find alternative ways to recruit labor for colonial projects. See Gary B. Ostrower, *The League of Nations from 1919 to 1929* (Garden City Park, NY: Avery, 1996). The literature on the expansion and endurance of slavery and forced labor in West Africa is helpful to provide context for our understanding of the skepticism Africans carried in the face of new schemes to extract their labor. See, for example, Suzanne Miers and Richard Roberts, eds., *The End of Slavery in Africa* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988); Carolyn A. Brown, “Testing the Boundaries of Marginality: Twentieth-Century Slavery and Emancipation Struggles in Nkanu, Northern Igboland, 1920–29,” *Journal of African History* 37, no. 1 (1996): 51–80; Kwabena Opare Akurang-Parry, “Colonial Forced Labor Policies for Road-Building in Southern Ghana and International Anti-Forced Labor Pressures, 1900–1940,” *African Economic History* 28 (2000): 1–25; Frederick Cooper, “Conditions Analogous to Slavery: Imperialism and Free Labor Ideology in Africa,” in *Beyond Slavery: Explorations of Race, Labor and Citizenship in Post-Emancipation Societies*, ed. Frederick Cooper, Thomas C. Holt, and Rebecca J. Scott (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000): 107–49; and A. E. Afigbo, *The Abolition of the Slave Trade in Southeastern Nigeria, 1885–1950* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2006).

The British government was also aware of local hostility toward the warrant chief system across the Niger Delta in the decade leading up to the boycott. In the aftermath of the deadly Sapele uprising, William E. Hunt, the newly appointed resident of Warri Province who was tasked with quelling the boycott and restoring peace and order, wrote at some length about this, revealing administrators' own frustrations with this system:

And here a word may be said of the Warrant Chiefs, a term which I have cordially disliked for years, and hope sometime to see disappear. As I have said, in this national crisis, for there is no doubt that "paying for one's head" is a matter that has touched the Sobo to the roots of his being in their minds tantamount to slavery, the Warrant Chiefs have been brushed aside, because for the most part they are an artificial creation who for the sake of their warrants and their vested interests are ready to consent to an unpopular measure. From all sides one hears that in this Province and especially in the Warri Division they are exceptionally corrupt, and it is clear that the questions asked in the Legislative Council in the last two or three years about the Warrant Chiefs in the neighborhood were not merely vexatious.³⁵

Corruption was a common and consistent complaint. As primary agents of the native courts, warrant chiefs often forced people to pay bribes for their cases to be heard or settled. They were also involved in the practice of pawning and slave dealing, in addition to recruiting forced labor.³⁶ Officials like Hunt were aware of these abuses and were even frustrated by them; but they insisted the warrant chiefs were indispensable agents of the state, especially in their struggle to recruit labor and collect taxes.

The Colonial Response and the Roots of Division

It took several weeks for British officials and local police to bring calm to Sapele and Warri. When the new resident of Warri Province, William Hunt, arrived at the beginning of October 1927, he identified two possible approaches to quash the boycott: "Two courses lay open to me, either to prosecute the arrest of Oshue of Obodo, Igbele of Onyene, and other Sobo agitators with the utmost vigour or to get into

³⁵ W. E. Hunt, qtd. in Baddeley to Amery, November 16, 1927, 6–7, in Nigeria, *Disturbance at Sapele in Warri Province*, CO 583/154/4, NAUK.

³⁶ Chapdeleine, *The Persistence of Slavery*.

touch with them first and ascertain whether they were labouring under any misunderstanding which could be cleared up.”³⁷ He chose to follow the second course, meeting each community separately over the course of several weeks in October. Resident Hunt was effective in using equal-parts diplomacy and the threat of force to accomplish his mandate to restore the flow of trade, as well as peace and order.³⁸ Official reporting from the district officers in the province cited the joint Itsekiri-Urhobo meeting in Igbudu (July) as the genesis of the boycott. These reports converged with Major Walker’s contemporaneous accounts of the violence in Warri and Sapele in September, which highlighted Urhobo communities and their leaders as the primary instigators (and agitators) of the protests.³⁹ A pattern was beginning to emerge in the official narrative about the boycott: the Urhobo community became the primary protagonists.

The series of meetings Hunt conducted through the month of October reveal more clearly the anxieties and tensions at play in the uprisings and trade boycott. The warrant chiefs’ interactions with him also paint a complicated picture of their conflicting impulse to comply and/or resist British efforts to gain more control. They also indicate Hunt’s commitment to thinking about these communities as ethnically and temperamentally distinct, and thus manageable using the tools of indirect rule. As distinct communities, their group loyalties could be sharpened, incentivizing their engagement with the government for more resources, both economic and political. Exploiting local divisions was the most efficient way to begin doing this, starting with a focus on those individuals and communities officials had already identified as being more resistant to British policies.

Hunt’s meetings with Itsekiri representatives suggested a wedge could be driven between the Itsekiri and Urhobo communities, communities that in July had collaborated to spearhead the boycott. Both Baddeley and Walker’s accounts of the violent protests in Sapele and

³⁷ Hunt, qtd. in Baddeley to Amery, November 16, 1927, 1, CO 583/154/4, NAUK.

³⁸ He was so effective in his management of Warri Province that he was soon promoted to acting lieutenant governor of the Southern Provinces in 1932.

³⁹ Ikime, “Anti-Tax Riots,” 561–62; Southern, report, February 16, 1928, 1–2, in folder “Nigeria, Annual Report, Warri Province: 1927,” WP 3/9-201/27 (Warri), NANI; Walker to the secretary of the Southern Provinces, October 20, 1927, 3, enclosure no. 2, in Nigeria, *Disturbance at Sapele*, CO 583/154/4/35–40, NAUK.

Warri highlight Urhobo communities and their leaders as the primary instigators of the boycott and the main protest agitators. This narrative was reinforced by Chief Dore Numa (locally known as Chief Dogho), a prominent Itsekiri warrant chief who had long been amenable to British interests in this region and whom many other Itsekiri leaders opposed and mobilized in opposition to during the planning of the boycott; he affirmed that most of the warrant chiefs supported the new tax law. However, he also noted, with some lament, the people's resistance to follow their chiefs, who even Hunt understood were an "artificial creation," especially among the neighboring Urhobo communities.⁴⁰

Officials identified the faction of Itsekiri leaders who colluded with Urhobo leaders to organize the boycott as being opposed to Chief Dogho, but this group was quickly dismissed as an insignificant threat to the new taxation policy. In Hunt's first meeting with the lead Itsekiri agitators – Omatsola and Otuedon – in Warri on October 10, they claimed to be princes of the royal house of "Big Warri" (presumably descendants of the last Olu, Akengbuwa, r. 1795–1848), arguing that the primary grievance was not taxation at all for the Itsekiri communities. Instead, it was the land rent policy in Warri that aggravated them most. Hunt recorded the following: "Among other things the Government's land policy in the past at Warri rankles in their minds, and they even went so far as to say that when the present lease was up they would offer the land to another country, a fantastic idea." Land was a consistent issue for the Itsekiri communities in and around Warri; most of the disputes involved their Urhobo and Ijaw neighbors rather than the British government.⁴¹

In addition, Baddeley noted in the margins of his report: "There have been a whole series of vexatious lawsuits against one of the Warri chiefs."⁴² The next day, October 11, a larger meeting with Itsekiri

⁴⁰ Hunt, qtd. in Baddeley to Amery, November 16, 1927, 3, CO 583/154/4, NAUK.

⁴¹ Hunt, qtd. in Baddeley to Amery, November 16, 1927, 2, CO 583/154/4, NAUK.

⁴² Hunt, qtd. in Baddeley to Amery, November 16, 1927, 3, CO 583/154/4, NAUK. The disputes typically revolved around claims originally made by Chief Dogho against other warrant chiefs on behalf of Itsekiri communities who did not necessarily accept his authority. The original cases date back to the 1890s and the first decade of the twentieth century. The original documents associated with these cases are difficult to locate, but they have been cited by local

leaders revealed the internal power struggle within the Itsekiri communities over chiefly authority. They had long resisted the warrant chiefs' efforts to claim political legitimacy. This was especially the case with Chief Dogho. Hunt's own assessment of Chief Dogho was not positive. He repeated the people's description of him as the “Government's wife” and a paramount chief without people. This language indicates the nature of the distrust Itsekiri communities had toward Chief Dogho: he was seen as a loyal and consistent British collaborator. Assessing this situation, Hunt offered the following conclusion: “Thus disunited the Jekris [Itsekiris] provide fruitful ground for the seeds of discontent, and the cure for their troubles is said to lie in the appointment of an Olu or Head of the Jekris who would live at Big Warri.”⁴³

Installing a new Olu (paramount chief) in Warri – as Hunt suggests in this report – would seem an odd remedy to the problem of legitimacy, given the people's hostility toward warrant chiefs. However, this solution would bring Warri and the other four southern provinces into alignment with the northern and western provinces, and it would thus unify the administrative structure of the colony – something Frederick Lugard had envisioned when he oversaw the amalgamation of the two protectorates in 1914. The official scheme to restore the Olu title became a central feature of official British policy in Warri, and it would have long-term ramifications in the struggle for power and authority in the province over several decades, as we shall see in the following chapters. Furthermore, Hunt's thoughts conformed to, and confirmed, the state's commitment to what by then was becoming the accepted ideology of indirect rule, as articulated by Frederick Lugard: to rule through “natural” rulers where possible.

The tradition of titled kingship among the Itsekiri was linked to the royal house of Benin since the late fifteenth century; however, this

historians. For an overview of these cases, see O. Edevbie, “Who Owns Colonial and Post-Colonial Warri?” in *History of the Urhobo People of Niger Delta*, ed. Peter Ekeh (Buffalo, NY: Urhobo Historical Society, 2007): 276–78. See also Ikime, *Merchant Prince*, 193.

⁴³ Hunt, qtd. in Baddeley to Amery, November 16, 1927, 3, CO 583/154/4, NAUK. It is not clear in this text who specifically made this recommendation to restore the Olu title, whether it was a local political leader or a British official, or perhaps a more senior British official assessing the situation in Warri. It is also not clear that the government's understanding of the term “Big Warri” has the same meaning or is even the same place that the anti-Dogho faction of Itsekiris referred to as “Big Warri.”

practice ceased after the death of Akengbuwa in 1848, creating a long-standing internal political crisis among Itsekiri communities.⁴⁴ For a period of time, Nana Olomu – a wealthy merchant who lived along the Benin River in Ebrohimi – managed to maintain authority over a portion of the Itsekiri communities along the Benin River, but he lost his power in 1895 when the British exiled him after a successful military campaign to gain full control of the palm oil trade in this part of the Niger Delta. Olomu's position as a powerful merchant, however, did not make him the paramount leader of all Itsekiri communities. This was a problem, both for Itsekiri unity and for the British government in their effort to implement indirect rule in this region.

Olomu's privileged position prior to his expulsion in 1895 reflected an alliance between the Itsekiri traders and the British government in the lucrative palm oil trade. However, when Governor MacDonald sought to impose control over the Southern Protectorate between 1891 and 1894, tensions mounted over access to the palm oil trade. In the wake of the military expedition that led to Olomu's expulsion, Chief Dogho became a favored Itsekiri middleman and reliable government agent, and he was eventually given a warrant, with jurisdiction extending from the Benin River (Olomu's territory) to Warri, Sapele, and Kwale. The Olu title would remain defunct until 1936, when it was restored by the British government in the aftermath of the trade boycott and in the midst of administrative reorganization (see Chapter 2).⁴⁵ Hunt's suggestion to install an Olu at the end of the 1927 boycott suggests that this particular solution was several years in the making, and the boycott was the primary catalyst to act on this suggestion. It also indicates an official preference toward the Itsekiri communities as local allies, and likely informs Hunt and Walker's sense that Urhobo communities and their leaders were primarily responsible for the 1927 protests. This kind of political calculation was a common imperial strategy – “divide and conquer” – to pacify local resistance in the history of British conquest and imperial governance.⁴⁶

For Urhobo communities, in addition to their grievances with the warrant chief system discussed above, they were concerned about

⁴⁴ Lloyd, “The Itsekiri in the Nineteenth Century.”

⁴⁵ Adogbeji Salubi, “The Change of the Title ‘Olu of Itsekiri’ to ‘Olu of Warri’ (c. 1952)” (Unpublished Manuscript, 1952).

⁴⁶ Eric Posner, Kathryn Spier, and Adrian Vermeule, “Divide and Conquer,” *Journal of Legal Analysis* 2, no. 2 (2010): 417–71.

losing land and export revenues, as well as the increased burden of meeting the new tax. In a meeting with Hunt at Jeremi on October 14, Urhobo leaders shared their concerns over rumors of a British government plan to install a palm plantation system that would remove them from their land.⁴⁷ Speaking on behalf of Urhobo communities in Warri, Oshue tried to further explain Urhobo resistance, arguing that people would find it difficult to pay the new taxes because they already struggled to pay importation taxes, taxes on bicycles, and native court fees. He appealed for a grace period of three years to begin enforcing the new tax law. In concluding his appeal, Oshue expressed his personal fear that his people would flog him if he agreed on their behalf to pay the new taxes, which they believed were tantamount to agreeing to slavery.⁴⁸

After assuring the large gathering that the British had no intention of imposing a plantation system in this region, Hunt requested an immediate end to the boycott, charging Oshue – one of the primary organizers of the boycott – with this responsibility. Hunt’s request makes it clear that he held the Urhobo leaders primarily accountable for the 1927 boycott and the violence that erupted in September. Hunt and Oshue negotiated a short timeframe for Oshue to consult with the surrounding villages to find a resolution regarding taxation and lifting the boycott. Oshue had ten days to accomplish this, and the meeting closed peacefully. Trade resumed immediately after this meeting, leaving Hunt optimistic about the new tax policy finally getting off the ground.⁴⁹

Over the next ten days, Resident Hunt, accompanied by Major Walker and a small contingent of police officers, visited the neighboring districts of Kwale, Aseh, and Forcados – predominantly Urhobo, Igbo, and Ijaw towns, respectively. From these meetings, he insightfully concluded that the decision to boycott and close the native courts took time to mature. Complicating this picture, Lieutenant Governor

⁴⁷ Hunt, qtd. in Baddeley to Amery, November 16, 1927, 4–5, CO 583/154/4, NAUK.

⁴⁸ Hunt, qtd. in Baddeley to Amery, November 16, 1927, 4–5, CO 583/154/4, NAUK. See also W. E. Hunt, “Enclosure No. 1 to Nigeria, Confidential Dispatch of 20 October 1927,” 4, CO 583/154/4, NAUK. Oshue is popularly remembered now as a hero of colonial resistance in Warri. A local symposium was held in his honor, titled *Reflections on Oshue and 80 Years After the 1927 Anti-Tax Revolt in Warri Province*, at the College of Education, Warri, Nigeria, in July 2007.

⁴⁹ Hunt, “Enclosure No. 1 to Nigeria,” 5, CO 583/154/4, NAUK.

Baddeley interrupted Hunt's account to speculate, based on intelligence reports, that leaders of the boycott established communications with advisors in Lagos and Accra to seek advice on how best to protest government policy. This theory was reinforced by another report of a party led by Otuedon (the Itsekiri co-organizer of the boycott), who traveled to Lagos in the ten-day interim to seek out Joseph Casely Hayford, a prominent barrister and land tenure activist from the Gold Coast, to procure legal counsel in prosecuting Walker for murder.⁵⁰ This official speculation also implicated Lagos activist and early nationalist Herbert Macaulay in fomenting resistance in Warri. In his summary of the situation, Baddeley speculated: "There is good reason to believe that much of the unrest is due to outside agitators. The name of Mr. Herbert Macaulay has been freely mentioned as one of those who have helped to fan the flame of opposition to the tax, but to date no direct proof of his complicity has been obtained."⁵¹

These notes indicate at least some recognition by colonial administrators that the people of Warri Province launched a conscious and organized resistance to British attempts to govern them directly. At the same time, these official speculations also reveal the government's resistance to view the people of these rural communities, which existed on the periphery of the administrative map, as rational, creative political actors.⁵² It is not hard to imagine the networks that would have

⁵⁰ Baddeley to Amery, October 20, 1927, 8, in Nigeria, *Disturbance at Sapele*, CO 583/154/4, NAUK. J. E. Casely Hayford was an early West African intellectual who shaped the early period of African nationalism. He was based in the Gold Coast, but like his contemporaries, he traveled frequently between the cosmopolitan British West African cities of Freetown, Lagos, and Monrovia, going often to England and the United States, engaged in a broad intellectual network. His best-known work is *Ethiopia Unbound: Studies in Race Emancipation* (London: Cass, 1911). For his particular interest in questions of land tenure in British West Africa see *The Truth About the West African Land Question* (London: Cass, 1898).

⁵¹ Baddeley to Amery, October 20, 1927, 6, CO 583/154/4, NAUK. A contemporary of J. E. Casely Hayford, Herbert Macaulay was a prominent Lagos Barrister who was also an early Nigerian nationalist and trade unionist.

⁵² For a classical treatment of this kind of imaginative resistance, see John Lonsdale, "Mau Mau's of the Mind: Making Mau Mau and Remaking Kenya," *Journal of African History* 31, no. 3 (1990): 393–421. Carolyn Brown also grapples with this kind of official resistance in her assessment of a strike launched by Enugu miners amid the 1945 General Strike in Nigeria: Carolyn A. Brown, "We Were All Slaves": *African Miners, Culture, and Resistance at the Enugu Government Colliery* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2003).

linked Warri Province to Lagos. It was in fact possible and quite plausible to get to Lagos quickly through the intricate system of creeks and lagoons along the coast. The market networks of the palm oil trade followed the same trading networks that linked Old Benin to the Yoruba city-states. Otuedon and other organizers could very well have reached out for counsel among seasoned barristers in Lagos.

In the ten-day interim, people's willingness to negotiate quickly dissipated, and Hunt sensed a hardening among the boycotters. Trade, which was tentatively on the upswing in the first couple of days of this negotiating period, slowed to a trickle and eventually ceased. The final meeting with Urhobo leaders took place on October 24 in Asagba, near Warri, heavily fortified by Major Walker, his subordinate officers, and fifty policemen. Hunt recorded an attendance of “four thousand strong.”⁵³ Oshue conveyed the decision, on behalf of Urhobo farmers and traders, that they would continue to withhold European trade until April of the following year, since the tax was not going to begin until then. Furthermore, he declared that the people would not attend the reopened native courts, because they did not have money to pay fines due to the lack of trade.⁵⁴

The Urhobo community firmly repudiated the British government's authority by continuing the boycott, and thus confirmed Hunt's suspicion that the Urhobo were central actors. These men and women did not solely depend on palm oil for their livelihood; they also produced and traded yam, cassava, maize, and other secondary crops. The foodstuffs trade continued with their neighbors in the region, and the only non-palm oil sector of the economy that would suffer was the trade in luxury items. Hunt did not expect this response. However, he could do little to force people to abandon the boycott beyond issuing threats. He did in fact threaten force if people insisted on evading the official courts, using the deaths and arrests that previously occurred in Sapele as an example of what could happen if people continued to resist.⁵⁵ Closing the meeting on a somber note, Hunt gave the people

⁵³ Hunt, qtd. in Baddeley to Amery, November 16, 1927, 8, in Nigeria, *Disturbance at Sapele in Warri Province*, CO 583/154/4, NAUK.

⁵⁴ Hunt, qtd. in Baddeley to Amery, November 16, 1927, 9, CO 583/154/4, NAUK.

⁵⁵ Hunt, qtd. in Baddeley to Amery, November 16, 1927, 10, CO 583/154/4, NAUK. Privately, he speculated that once he and the other British officers increased their numbers (Major Walker had already made requests for two

three days to call off the boycott in the hope that they would “see the stupidity of their action.”⁵⁶

The crisis dragged into November. The Ijaw and Urhobo communities, in particular, continued to boycott trade, closing off the creeks to complicit traders and intimidating local clerks from returning to work in the courts. Hunt sent several telegrams to the governor of the southern provinces to send more forces to the region to reinforce their effort to restore law and order. He received those reinforcements. On November 2, Hunt sent out a proclamation ordering people to resume trade and attend the courts. He also demanded Oshue’s surrender, identifying him as a primary agitator in the boycott. Oshue did surrender on November 5 and was sentenced to a year in prison.⁵⁷ This suggests that Hunt held Oshue responsible for continued Urhobo resistance. However, Oshue was constrained as a representative or spokesperson for his community, based on how he managed the negotiations with Hunt. Moreover, he does not seem to have taken a particularly oppositional stance. The only conclusion we can safely draw from the decision to imprison him is that he was a useful example against future resistance.

Niger Delta communities had organized themselves to meet the demands of the global palm oil trade over the course of a century, and before that, they were dynamic agents in the transatlantic slave trade. The British state entered this political economy without a clear sense of the internal function of local institutions. They therefore relied on warrant chiefs as local governing agents to shore up the distance between economic and governing imperatives. This relationship was fraught with frustration, confusion, and miscommunication. For example, figures like Oshue and Otuedon carried much more sway in the eyes of British officials than in the eyes of their local followers. This is clear when they were unable to leverage the extra time they requested from the British to persuade people to abandon the boycott. The people did not trust these warrant chiefs as legitimate leaders. Such a

commissioners and more police presence in the region), they would be able to enforce the native courts. He expected people to retaliate, and officers would be forced to make arrests and, in turn, revitalize the native courts.

⁵⁶ Hunt, qtd. in Baddeley to Amery, November 16, 1927, 12, CO 583/154/4, NAUK.

⁵⁷ Hunt, qtd. in Baddeley to Amery, November 16, 1927, 14, CO 583/154/4, NAUK.

positioning – between the colonial state and their constituents – put the warrant chiefs in a bind. They lacked full legitimacy among the local people, and the colonial state held them accountable when policy initiatives failed or became messy.⁵⁸ Ultimately, imperial agents like Oshue were employed to carry out the interests of the empire, and his failure to deliver the people’s consent to British governance led to his imprisonment.

Conclusion

The extent and duration of the 1927 boycott in Warri Province make it a meaningful episode in the broader narrative of British occupation in the southern provinces of Nigeria. The boycott was effective. European trading firms carried out fewer shipments from Warri ports that year. According to the Niger Company, if not for the boycott “oil [exports] would have shown a material increase [over 1926].”⁵⁹ In addition, British officials, upon learning of the translation error for the word “taxation,” quickly abandoned their original plan for individual taxation in favor of a “lump assessment,” where towns and villages had to pay a collective fee based on the census counts of a given town or village, until they could more effectively establish a native administrative structure in the region.⁶⁰

Significantly, the silences and omissions in the lieutenant governor’s communication with the colonial secretary are suggestive of the role that state violence would continue to play in Southern Nigeria. In abruptly ending his report by noting that trade resumed shortly after Oshue’s imprisonment, Baddeley gives the false impression of an anticlimactic resolution to the Warri boycott. There are, however, hints that the boycott ended with much more violence than the imprisonment of its identified leaders. Secretary Baddeley chose to omit these details in his final report to the Colonial Office, concluding with the

⁵⁸ Martin Chanock, *Law, Custom and Social Order: The Colonial Experience in Malawi and Zambia* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1998). Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), 184.

⁵⁹ Supervising agent, Niger Company, Ltd. to district officer, Warri Division, February 15, 1928, 18 in folder “Nigeria, Annual Report, Warri Province: 1927,” WP 3/9-201/27 (Warri), NANI.

⁶⁰ Ikime, “Anti-Tax Riots,” 564.

following acknowledgement: “As you will observe, I have only quoted certain paragraphs of Mr. Hunt’s report. . . . The portions omitted refer to actions, possibly ill-advised and provocative, of certain officers in the province. Before judgment can be passed on these actions, it will be necessary to give the officers concerned an opportunity of defending themselves and to obtain the considered views of the Resident.”⁶¹ This clear omission hints at a broader, more pervasive use of state violence – often meted out with impunity – to quell dissent in the process of colonial pacification. This official use of violence, while concealed from historical view here, was part of a pattern of government response to opposition and resistance in this region, and it would continue to a climax when several women were killed in 1929 during the Aba Women’s War.⁶²

The 1927 boycott is also a meaningful episode in the broader narrative of minority communities in Nigeria. British officials rightly assessed the Warri boycott as an “anti-government movement.”⁶³ Like their eastern counterparts, western Niger Delta communities protested the arbitrary authority of the warrant chiefs and the native court

⁶¹ Baddeley to Amery, October 20, 1927, 15, in Nigeria, *Disturbance at Sapele*, CO 583/154/4, NAUK. In the margin of this passage, we can see that someone speculated which officers might have committed these “ill-advised and provocative” actions: Talbot, Dundas, De la Motte. Note, Talbot has been used in much of the historiography of this region as a primary anthropological source of knowledge on the communities of the Niger Delta. Percy A. Talbot, *Tribes of the Niger Delta: Their Religions and Customs* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1932).

⁶² Michael Pesek compellingly argues that the use of unmatched force was a common approach in colonies where colonial authority and effective administration was stretched thin. This was certainly the case in Warri Province. See Michael Pesek, “Colonial Conquest and the Struggle for the Presence of the Colonial State in German East Africa, 1885–1903,” in *Inventing Collateral Damage: Civilian Casualties, War, and Empire*, ed. Stephen J. Rockel and Rick Halpern (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2009), 163–65. For a more in-depth treatment of colonial policing and the regular use of violence to discipline and control local communities, see Martin Thomas, *Violence and Colonial Order: Police, Workers and Protest in the European Colonial Empires, 1918–1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). See also Michelle R. Moyd, who provides nuance to the lived experience of those who policed colonial territories and imposed everyday acts of violence on local communities, in Michelle R. Moyd, *Violent Intermediaries: African Soldiers, Conquest, and Everyday Colonialism in German East Africa* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2014).

⁶³ J. E. W. Flood, April 1928, 1, in folder “Disturbances in Warri Province,” CO 583/158/14, NAUK.

system. They were also fatigued by the volatility of the global palm oil economy. Although the boycott was an organized and coordinated effort on the part of Itsekiri, Urhobo, Ijaw, Isoko, and Western Igbo peoples, their efforts did not break down neatly along ethnic lines. If we read the official reports closely, the uprisings took place in the major townships, cities, and ports in the province, which were ethnically heterogeneous zones, long built around trade and export: Warri, Sapele, Burutu, Effurun, and Ebrohimi. We also glimpse internal political tensions among the Itsekiri and with their neighbors that existed prior to the boycott. These tensions would intensify in council meetings and town halls during the administrative reorganization process in the following decade. Succession disputes, struggles over land claims, and worries about land loss in the face of an increasingly visible colonial state all reverberated against the pressure of having to pay new taxes. These were communities and a political economy experiencing deep change at the end of the 1920s.

In the years following the boycott, the cooperative nature of relations between each of these communities disintegrated. In this context, chiefly control over well-articulated ethnic communities anchored on land with clear boundaries mattered. Anxiety over land claims and political authority increased as native administration normalized ethnically defined political units. Ethnicity became increasingly salient as remitted tax revenues would flow back to these newly reorganized towns, divisions, and districts. The disintegration of this cooperation was a result of colonial intervention with the purpose of governing the heterogeneous communities of the Niger Delta in a disciplined, well-ordered way. Colonial officials persisted in defining these communities, despite their well-organized, cooperative project to resist this intervention, as an unruly backwater people without law or order, as we will see in Chapter 2. In their effort to reorganize these communities, the British government remained largely ignorant of the people they sought to control. In the decade of reorganization that followed the boycott, officials ignored the very real, structural, economic, and political crises fueling people's resistance. The colonial state simply brushed aside concern over abuses in the warrant chief system in favor of meeting British imperatives to formalize their rule in the Niger Delta. Furthermore, the accumulation chiefly of authority and wealth intensified as British officials encouraged and cultivated new traditions of paramount chieftaincy.

True to form, British economic policy worked against their efforts to reorganize functional local governing institutions. The Colonial Office in London allowed the Nigerian palm oil industry to slowly collapse amid competing ideologies of development and extraction. The resources needed to prove the argument that taxation was beneficial to these communities were scarce and disproportionally allocated to the more lucrative cocoa-producing western provinces through the 1930s. Increased competition – articulated in ethnic terms – was a central outcome of the reorganization effort, which will be centrally treated in Chapter 2. The breakdown of the coalition among the communities in Warri Province – the very coalition that made the boycott successful – is perhaps the most tragic outcome of the reorganization period. As tenuous as these coalitions may have been, they undergirded an articulate and organized final stand against British rule.