# African Resistance: The Other Side of the Story

*AiCE Africanism & Pan-African Studies — Arms, culture, and the will to remain African*

It would be a profound historical injustice — and a continuation of the colonial narrative — to present Africans only as victims of colonial rule. Africans were not passive. They were not silent. From the moment of colonial imposition to the moment of independence, African peoples resisted — with arms, with culture, with religion, with political organisation, and with the sheer stubborn refusal to be mentally colonised even when physical resistance was impossible.

## Armed Resistance: The Long Tradition

The tradition of armed resistance to colonial rule did not end with the initial conquest examined in the previous lesson series. It continued throughout the colonial period, in wave after wave of uprisings that required the colonial powers to maintain expensive military establishments across the continent.

| Uprising & Location | Significance |
|---|---|
| Bambatha Rebellion — Natal, South Africa (1906) | Zulu rebellion against the poll tax; over 4,000 Africans killed by British forces; last major armed Zulu resistance. |
| Chilembwe Rising — Nyasaland, Malawi (1915) | Led by mission-educated preacher John Chilembwe against forced labour and WWI conscription; an early example of Christian-educated African political leadership. |
| Bondelswarts Rebellion — South West Africa (1922) | Nama uprising against South African dog taxes and land restrictions, suppressed with aerial bombing — one of the first uses of aircraft against Africans. |
| Aba Women's War — Nigeria (1929) | Mass uprising of Igbo women against colonial taxation and the erosion of women's traditional market authority. |

| Uprising & Location | Significance |
|---|---|
| Mau Mau Uprising — Kenya (1952-1960) | The most sustained armed anti-colonial resistance in British Africa; forced Britain to accelerate Kenyan independence. |
| PAIGC Armed Struggle — Guinea-Bissau (1963-1974) | Amilcar Cabral's guerrilla campaign against Portuguese colonial rule; one of the most theoretically sophisticated liberation struggles. |

## The Aba Women's War: When African Women Led the Resistance

Among the most extraordinary acts of African resistance to colonial rule was the Aba Women's War of 1929 — known in Igbo as Ogu Umunwanyi (the Women's War) — an uprising of tens of thousands of Igbo women across a large area of southeastern Nigeria that shook British colonial authority to its foundations and represents one of the earliest and most powerful examples of mass political resistance by African women.

The immediate trigger was a rumour that the British colonial administration was planning to impose direct taxation on women — a profound violation of Igbo social norms, in which women controlled the markets and their market income was their own sovereign domain. In Igbo political culture, women had powerful collective institutions, including the practice of 'sitting on a man,' in which women would gather at the compound of a man who had violated social norms, singing, dancing, and making noise until he acknowledged his wrong. The Women's War was an extension of this tradition onto the colonial stage.

Women across the region — estimated at between 25,000 and 50,000 participants — put on leaves and carried sticks, gathering at Native Administration headquarters and demanding that the warrant chiefs resign, that courts be closed, and that the proposed tax be abandoned. When British forces opened fire on protesters at Aba and Calabar, killing thirty-two women and wounding many more, the uprising became a rallying point for anti-colonial sentiment across Nigeria. An official inquiry — the Aba Commission of Inquiry — was forced to acknowledge the legitimacy of many of the women's grievances.

The Aba Women's War demonstrates that African resistance to colonialism was not only an armed, male phenomenon, shows the political sophistication of African women's collective institutions, and anticipates the mass civil disobedience movements that would eventually force the colonial powers out.

## Cultural and Spiritual Resistance: Keeping the Soul Alive

Not all resistance was armed or openly political. One of the most profound forms of African resistance to colonialism was cultural — the determination to preserve African languages, religions, music, art, and social practices in the face of a colonial system that was actively trying to replace them with European equivalents.

The mission school system — through which the colonial powers and Christian missionaries provided education — was explicitly designed to produce Africans who thought in European categories, valued European culture, and were ashamed of their own. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, the Kenyan novelist and thinker, has written with devastating clarity about the experience of being punished at school for speaking his mother tongue Gikuyu — being made to wear a sign reading 'I am stupid' for using the language of his own people. This cultural violence was systematic and deliberate: it was, as Ngũgĩ argued, the colonisation of the mind.

Against this cultural assault, African communities preserved what they could. Oral traditions — stories, proverbs, histories, genealogies — were maintained across generations despite colonial education systems that did not teach them. African religious traditions went underground or syncretised with Christianity, producing powerful hybrid traditions — the Ethiopian church movement, the Kimbanguist church in the Congo, the Aladura churches in Nigeria — that combined Christian forms with African spiritual content and became centres of community solidarity and quiet resistance. African music — the blues in America, jazz, highlife in Ghana, jùjú in Nigeria, mbaqanga in South Africa — carried African cultural memory across the ocean and through the colonial period.

These cultural resistances were not merely sentimental. They were political acts. Every African family that told its children the names and achievements of their ancestors was resisting the colonial project of historical erasure. Every African church that conducted its services in an African language rather than English or French was asserting African

cultural dignity. Every African musician who played traditional rhythms was keeping alive something the coloniser wanted dead.

## Key Takeaways

African resistance to colonialism took many forms: armed uprisings that recurred throughout the colonial period, the Aba Women's War's demonstration of African women's political sophistication, and the quiet, sustained cultural resistance of language, religion, and music that kept African identity alive against a system built to erase it. None of these forms of resistance were marginal — together, they are as much a part of this history as the violence they answered. The next lesson turns to a different kind of consequence: what all of this — the violence and the resistance both — did to the African mind.