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## **Songs and Disrobing, Marches and Arsons: A Gender Analysis of the Western Region Crisis in Ibadan (1962-1966)<sup>1</sup>**

**Panata, Sara**

*Translated from French to English by Laila Le Guen<sup>2</sup>*

The recent appeal made to the Prime Minister, Sir Abubakar by the UPGA Women's Wing in Western Nigeria, is a belated attempt to cover their ignoble role in a series of violent acts – looting and burning of houses, and mass killings of innocent people – following the defeat of the UPGA at the recent parliamentary elections in Western Nigeria. Certainly, these women cannot claim to be innocent of the bloody riots perpetrated by UPGA hirelings, hoodlums and human beasts [...]. It is very shameful, disgraceful and the height of moral laxity for those who claimed to be responsible mothers and wives to take active part in destruction of human lives and properties in the name of politics. [...] It is quite an open secret that these women started the rowdy scene through organised riotous demonstrations and violent processions in major towns. Markets were ransacked, market women were beaten up for refusing to join the illegal processions.<sup>3</sup>

### **Introduction**

Ibadan, November 1965. In her appeal to the *Daily Sketch*, the politician Olufunto Thompson condemns the raging violence perpetrated by the United Progressive Grand Alliance women's wing. Olufunto Thompson, a market woman by profession, was a member of the ruling Nigerian National Democratic Party, serving as National Secretary of its women's wing. The attacks she denounces had begun in 1962 and took a dark turn in 1965 when they became a daily occurrence in the region.

Whether considering the politicisation of markets, participation in protest marches or head-on clashes with other political parties, the multifaceted involvement of grassroots women party members in the 1962-1966 political crisis is unprecedented. Indeed, they had hitherto been relegated to secondary roles such as propaganda and grassroots organising<sup>4</sup>. This paper aims to bring to light new gendered divisions of political labour as well as a gendered restructuring of urban space in a time of political crisis. This is achieved by carrying out a cross-analysis of men's and women's political mobilisation during the Western crisis in Nigeria (1962-1965), viewed from the city of Ibadan.

The situation of instability analysed in this paper began on the heels of Nigeria's independence on 1 October 1960. At the time, the country was divided into three politically, and administratively independent regions (Western, Eastern and Northern) coordinated on the national level. Since the

1950s, three parties dominated the political landscape along these regional dividing lines: the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC, founded in 1944) in the Eastern Region, the Nigerian People Congress (NPC, founded in 1949) in the Northern Region and the Action Group (AG, founded in 1951) in the Western Region (Falola and Heaton 2008). In 1962, the Western Region was ripped apart after the implosion of its leading party, the AG, which gave rise to two rival factions and led to a reconfiguration of the established three-party political equilibrium in the country. One of these factions was close to Obafemi Awolowo, the historical leader of the party, who was also the AG's national representative. It promoted democratic socialism, a political orientation meant to break new ground so as to attract voters beyond the West. The other faction was close to Samuel Ladoke Akintola, Premier of the Western Region<sup>5</sup>. It demanded more and more autonomy over regional affairs, thus serving the interests of local conservative classes, and formed an alliance with the federal majority party, the NPC. This split spiralled into an ever-expanding cycle of violence and riots, leading to an unprecedented political crisis and a turning point in the country's history<sup>6</sup>. Grassroots women party members played a distinct role in this crisis, one that is best grasped by closing in on the city level and specifically on the city of Ibadan. As capital of the Western Region, Ibadan was the heart of political and administrative activity, and the point of origin of these clashes.

### **Writing gender into political urban history in 1960s Nigeria**

Owing to the diversity of the country, academic research focusing on Nigeria has often favoured a city-wide lens, and studies on women's mobilisations have followed this trend (Callaway 1987, George 2014, Oladejo 2016, Byfield 2022). However, the latter have mostly opted for a microhistory approach overlooking the spatial dimension of these mobilisations. This paper interrogates urban spaces of dissent and gives room to Ibadan's streets and lively markets as well as to sites of formal political power in the city. The urban space is envisioned as a particularly apt vantage point to observe not only "political debates and struggles" (Fourchard 2004, 136), but also a specific gendered division and hierarchy of political labour manifested in political practices and activist spaces. Contributing to a body of work within the "politics from below" approach (Bayart 2008), this article suggests a dual shift in focus: "outside of the most obvious sites of conflict" (Bouilly and Rillon 2016, 8) and beyond key politicians. The crux of the analysis rests on highlighting the gendering of multiple

forms of political participation (Parliament disruption, mocking songs, defiant disrobing (Diabate 2020), marches and arsons). These actions are seen in their urban expressions, where “the public are equipped with appropriate decoders” (Toulabor 1991, 136) to understand their nuances and significance. The relationship between gender constructs and repertoire of action, already widely studied since the 1980s (Ardener 1973, Allman (ed.) 2004, Masquelier (ed.) 2005, Oriola 2016, Ebila and Tripp 2017, Diabate 2020), is brought into dialogue with the spatial dimension of these uprisings, leading to two central questions: How did social gender assignments and gender divisions of urban space determine the activists’ choice of a particular repertoire of action? In what ways were these gender assignments and divisions of urban space restructured in a time of crisis? Numerous studies have shown that “the relevance of gender, when considered as a relational category, is to show that urban space is the product of the relation between masculinities and femininities (and not only between men and women), which implies an examination of physical as well as symbolic and political spaces occupied by women [and men] in the city” (Mosconi 2015, 24). Several studies provide an in-depth analysis of moments of crisis as catalysers for the transformation of gender relations, whether circumscribed to the duration of an event or setting in motion long-lasting social and political changes (Bergère 2006). This observation also applies to the localised episode of urban history presented here.

With the creation of political parties led by literate male figures in the 1950s, Ibadan women were invited to form women’s wings. Rather than signalling interest in promoting women-specific agendas, this apparent opening of political parties to women’s participation was linked to the parties’ need to create a grassroots base and to their desire to be more representative (Panata 2020). As such, the activities of the women’s wings essentially took place in the streets of Ibadan and in the city’s markets, where women activists played a considerable role in the parties by becoming their popular mouthpieces. Although leaders of women’s wings were often literate or from an affluent social background, the majority of the women involved in politics were market women<sup>7</sup>. Like in the case of Mali, as described by Ophélie Rillon, “while literate and wage-earning elites participated in political meetings held in their homes and in public buildings, others occupied the streets, turning these familiar places into ‘a daily activist space’” (Rillon 2016, 90). Considerable expectations were

associated with grassroots women's actions in terms of votes, promotion and defence of the parties and the establishment of a grassroots foothold. In spite of this, party meetings were dominated by male activists, who held the decision power. These hierarchies were composed and recomposed during the various phases of the 1962-1966 crisis.

An analysis of this episode also opens up the exploration of a largely untapped period of the continent's history, namely the one following independence. The position of women in decolonisation movements has been extensively documented through numerous studies that bring nuances to the surface while being unanimous in recognising the central and ubiquitous role women have played in these struggles (Geiger 2002, Bouilly and Rillon 2016). Conversely, the early post-independence period remains understudied, as if the achievement of this landmark spelt the end of the need for women to mobilise and take part in politics. A sharper focus on local history helps us grasp the political role that women activists continued to play in the wake of independence.

Finally, this article also looks back on a chapter of Nigerian history that, despite its unparalleled level of violence in the region's history and its lasting impact on the trajectory of the country, remains largely forgotten<sup>8</sup>. The 1962-1966 period was the most massive crisis in Ibadan's history in the twentieth century: it saw entire industries just ticking over and police repression as well as curfews hindering daily activities in the city, spurring residents to join protests or to use various means to bring them to a halt.

This research relies on a varied array of sources. Nigerian institutional archives do not dwell on this episode, hence the need to make use of contemporary press, especially the *Daily Times* (DT, a national publication based in Lagos), the *Daily Sketch* (DS, based in Ibadan, close to Akintola) and the *Nigerian Tribune* (NT, based in Ibadan, close to Awolowo), as well as British Pathé's newsreel archive repository<sup>9</sup>. UPGA files held in Sopolu Library's collections in Ikenne, and others about the NNDP kept within the private archives of activist Elizabeth Adekogbe in Ibadan were also consulted for this research. These documents were cross-referenced with semi-directed interviews with 25 market women involved in party politics at the time<sup>10</sup>. They were carried out in Yoruba with assistance from Adebayo Adedeji, a Nigerian colleague, between 2014 and 2016 in three Ibadan daily markets.

These markets were selected based on their role in shaping the older generation of market women and on their influence in the 1960s riots: Oja Oba, created in 1830, is the oldest food market area in Ibadan. It is located in the historical centre, opposite Mapo Hall, the symbolic seat of power of the colonial regime and later of the regional authorities; Oje, created in 1860, is a market specialising in weaving supplies, herbal remedies and foodstuffs; Dugbe, created in 1919, deals in fabrics and cooking utensils (Lloyd and Mabogunje 1967, Falola 2012).

### **The Inciting Incident: A Men's Parliament in Crisis**

On 25 May 1962, AG MPs attending a session at the House of Assembly of the Western Region in Ibadan escaped the building through the windows after the police used teargas to break up the meeting. This sounded the death knell of the party and the beginning of a political crisis in the Southwest.

Palpable ideological rivalries between Akintola and Awolowo started tensing up in 1961, leading the party to a split into two factions<sup>11</sup>. On 21 May 1962, AG representatives close to Awolowo signed a petition addressed to the governor of the Western Region, Sir Adeoji Aderemi II, demanding the resignation of Premier Akintola. Their plan was to have him replaced by Alhaji Dauda Soroye Adegbenro, a politician whose views were closely aligned with Awolowo's. Akintola called on Ibadan's High Court of Justice to invalidate this nomination. On 25 May 1962, as the House of Assembly was gathered to give an official vote of confidence to Adegbenro, the minority faction led by Akintola occupied the room, determined to bring the meeting to a halt before Adegbenro's inauguration as Premier. Here is a description of this scene by political scientist John Mackintosh:

The House of Assembly met at 9 a.m. and after prayers, as Chief Odebiyi rose to move the first motion, Mr E.O. Oke, a supporter of Chief Akintola, jumped on the table shouting "There is fire on the mountain". He proceeded to fling chairs about the chamber. Mr E. Ebubedike, also a supporter of Chief Akintola, seized the mace, attempted to club the Speaker with it but missed and broke the mace on the table. [...] Mr Akinyemi (NCNC) and Messrs Adigun and Adeniya [pro-Akintola] continued to throw chairs, the opposition joined in and there was such disorder that the Nigeria Police released tear gas and cleared the House (Mackintosh 1966, 448)

Following these parliamentary clashes, federal Prime Minister Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa declared a state of emergency in the Western Region. The AG was suspended for a period of six months and

regional leadership was taken over by an interim government that pronounced the banishment of key AG politicians from the city of Ibadan. In the same vein, public gatherings and meetings were prohibited across the board. These restrictions soon brought about internal wranglings: within two months, Akintola's political allies took advantage of their connections within the interim government to recover their freedom of movement in the city while those close to Awolowo were still banished (Diamond 1988). Moreover, a commission of inquiry was open against Awolowo and his political allies, who were charged with embezzlement of the regional government's budget and of illegal possession of firearms. In September 1962, Awolowo and thirty AG politicians were found guilty of high treason and sentenced to ten years in prison. In January 1963, Akintola was reinstated as Premier (Falola and Heaton 2008).

Following these events, former members of the AG spread out across the political spectrum. Those who were loyal to Awolowo formed alliances with members of the former opposition party, the NCNC, and with minority parties from the North (Amino Kanu's NEPU and Joseph Tarka's United Middle Belt Congress) to coalesce into the United Progressive Grand Alliance (UPGA). Hannah Idowu Dideolu (HID) Awolowo, the wife of the historical leader, led the UPGA at regional level. The party's women's wing was mostly made up of former members of the defunct AG, with a broad-based participation of market women, including Alhaja Humuani Amoke Alaga of Dugbe Market (Panata 2015). While in other cities in the region, market women tended to follow Akintola in larger numbers due to his proposal to reduce women's taxes, in Ibadan the majority of market women supported Awolowo, especially since the introduction of his free education program in the mid-1950s.

Akintola inaugurated a new party, the Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP), better known by its Yoruba name, *Ẹgbé Dẹmọ*, and formed a coalition with the Northern People's Congress, a Northern conservative party led by federal Prime Minister Tafawa Balewa, thus creating the new Nigerian National Alliance. The women's wing of this new party was kick-started under the leadership of Faderera Akintola, Akintola's wife, alongside activist Elizabeth Adekogbe (Panata 2016), with Olufunto Thompson as National Secretary. In Ibadan, this wing was led by Madam Humuani Apampa, a market woman at Dugbe Market. The impact of this reconfiguration of the political

equilibrium echoed well beyond the walls of the public buildings from whence the first tremors were felt.

### **Rebel markets: mocking songs drowning out politically motivated harassment**

Starting in 1963, clashes erupted in the city. Urban spaces were subject to a gradual process of politicisation along with an expansion of the number of law enforcement agents, as the newly formed NNDP progressively took over control of the government. Local thugs became “thugs in uniform”, hired by the police to “[molest] and [victimise] members and agents of political parties opposed to the party in power” (Fourchard 2008, 17). NNDP supporters used markets as recruitment grounds for sympathisers and to repel opponents<sup>12</sup>.

#### ***Figure 1: HID Awolowo and Alhaja Humuani Alaga*<sup>13</sup>**

In this climate of politicisation of the markets, grassroots women affiliated with the UPGA women’s wing - the vast majority of which were market women - found themselves in charge of unprecedented political activities<sup>14</sup>. Indeed, male members of the party’s core group were imprisoned, and male grassroots activists feared for their safety in this heavily militarised space. Similarly, UPGA women’s leaders were not exempt from police brutality and were subjected to violence at the hands of the ruling party, as attested by the numerous physical attacks perpetrated against HID Awolowo and other female political organisers during their tours of the Western Region<sup>15</sup>. However, grassroots women activists fell through the cracks of physical confrontations in the markets, as they were less readily identified with party activities in the city. They were undoubtedly on the receiving end of harassment and various disruptions, but they remained relatively sheltered from arbitrary arrests, physical violence and political assassinations carried out by the NNDP. Ordinarily present in these markets, they were mostly seen as a harmless mass and an easy target for manipulation by NNDP members on the campaign trail. In the midst of this crisis, spatial assignments as well as normative feminine assignments in the political field granted them some breathing room in the markets.



During an interview taking place in June 2016, Adepoju, an activist and flour trader at Dugbe Market (see map), recounts the experience of these grassroots UPGA activists faced with NNDP supporters (called Ẹgbẹ Dẹmọ in the songs) who had come to campaign for votes in the market:

They [the Akintola faction] used petrol in burning houses, some people died in their houses, some ran away, they killed some but our husbands and friends, we hid them inside the home and we stood at the door, we didn't allow them to come out.

Why did you hide them?

Ah [surprise]! They could kill them, it was we, the women, that came out to them. They didn't kill us! We were just singing outside. We locked the door and we were saying:

[1.]

**Dẹmọ la wà**

*We are in Dẹmọ*

**Ká ra ó dè wá, kó d'ọmọ wa**

*For me to be comfortable,  
for my children to be comfortable*

**Dẹmọ l'awà**

*We are in Dẹmọ*

[2.]

**Dẹmọ mo wà**

*I am in Dẹmọ*

**Bo rí núù mi bó ò r'ókàn mi**

*Whether you can read my mind or not*

**Dẹmọ mo wà**

*I am in Dẹmọ*

So, did you support NNDP?

We didn't support them. We were only protecting our husbands [by pretending], we were not in alliance with them. If you didn't sing that songs, they could continue to kill our husbands, they could also wet

buildings and torch them. We would just come out to them, we [have] saved our husbands [that way] we have saved them.<sup>16</sup>

While the men fell back on the domestic sphere to escape violence, market women activists kept the markets alive to protect their husbands and comrades, playing their ordinary role as traders in order to pursue political goals. Thus, as explained by Adepoju, they composed songs in favour of the ruling party. The song interpreted by Adepoju is made up of two stanzas. The first one (1) glorifies the NNNDP. Women opposition activists sang their embrace of the ruling party so as to be spared by NNNDP supporters, for them to leave their homes unscathed and thus protect their husbands and comrades who were hiding indoors. The second stanza (2) would be sung once NNNDP members were gone, distorting the chorus of praise and revealing the market women's real political position. Had NNNDP members been able to read their minds, they would have understood that their display of violence made no dent in the women's choice of political positioning.

Similarly to other contexts, market women activists resorted to a semantic display of political mockery. "Essentially made up of colourful nicknames, reinterpreted and remastered ruling party songs and slogans", this expression of mockery proceeded through a splitting of "the usual or conventional meaning of words, achieved by endowing them with another, semi-abstruse meaning" (Toulabor 1981, 57). The song in question here provides a clear example of this mechanism: praises to the party were transformed into an opposition slogan. While some songs were rich in metaphors (for instance, Akintola was often assimilated to Awolowo's dog), others mobilised a more aggressive register denouncing the NNNDP's brutality:

**[1.]**

**Power, ọlówó oró**

*Power [NNDP], the one with a harmful hand*

**Má f'owó òsì gbá ọmọ̀ mi**

*Don't hit my child with your left hand,*

**Ọlówó oro [ẹ̀rín]**

*The one with a harmful hand<sup>17</sup>*

**[2.]**

**Òtọ́ dé ọjà ó kùtà**

*The truth got to the market but it was not patronised,*

**Ọ̀wón gógó là ńra èke**

*Falsehood is expensively sought-after<sup>18</sup>.*

The first song called the NNDP's attempts to hold on to its position of power, "criminal". The lyrics repurposed the NNDP's symbol (an open right hand), chosen by the party as an allegory of transparency, into an instrument of violence: it was this hand that NNDP supporters used to kill their political opponents. UPGA women activists could only sing their hope that the left hand of power would not be used to perpetrate acts of violence. The second song denounced the NNDP's political discourse as fallacious while recognising how successful this strategy had been and lamenting the UPGA's inability to voice its ideas, presented as truthful. Women activists were getting at the heart of the NNDP's political discourse, which focused on displaying complete transparency and exposing corruption.

These songs were understood as full-fledged political discourse, similar to a grassroots political manifesto providing an alternative to official discourse. The use of mocking language aimed to "symbolically destabilise power" (Toulabor 1981, 136) and simultaneously enabled market women activists to spread political unease in popular urban spaces. These songs opened up pathways for

their ideas to roam the city's streets and markets, evading censorship and circulating much farther than official discourses which continued to be used as an instrument of propaganda in an authoritarian context<sup>19</sup>.

In October 1964, grassroots UPGA activists and leaders of the women's wing banded together to send a delegation to the Western Region governor to protest against police abuse in the markets<sup>20</sup>. A month later, the situation had not improved. A group of 4,000 women activists, among which many market women, got together in Oke Bola at Awolowo's home and called upon the municipal councillors to ensure that traders were able to carry out business without "any additional disturbances". They highlighted the fact that they were prevented from working "for fear of being pounced upon by local government policemen [...] for not possessing a NNDP cards"<sup>21</sup>. They threatened to boycott the markets if the situation was not redressed. The situation remained tense during the 1964 federal election campaign, and clashes were commonplace. Changes did occur in the run-up to regional elections in the West without meeting the women activists' expectations.

### **(Un)dressing the Riots: Women's Bodies on the Front Line**

It is time "to drive the last nail on the NNDP coffin"<sup>22</sup>: such was the message shared by activists of the UPGA women's wing four days before the regional elections, set to take place on 11 October 1965. Urban clashes between the two coalitions moved from the streets to the ballot box. Women supporting the NNDP, for their part, campaigned in the markets using propaganda materials. They gave out T-shirts bearing Akintola's face and English language slogans ("Vote for Samuel Ladoke Akintola (SLA)") as well as basins imprinted with the phrase "Vote for Egbé Dẹmọ" in Yoruba.

#### ***Figure 2 : NNDP propaganda at Ibadan markets<sup>23</sup>***

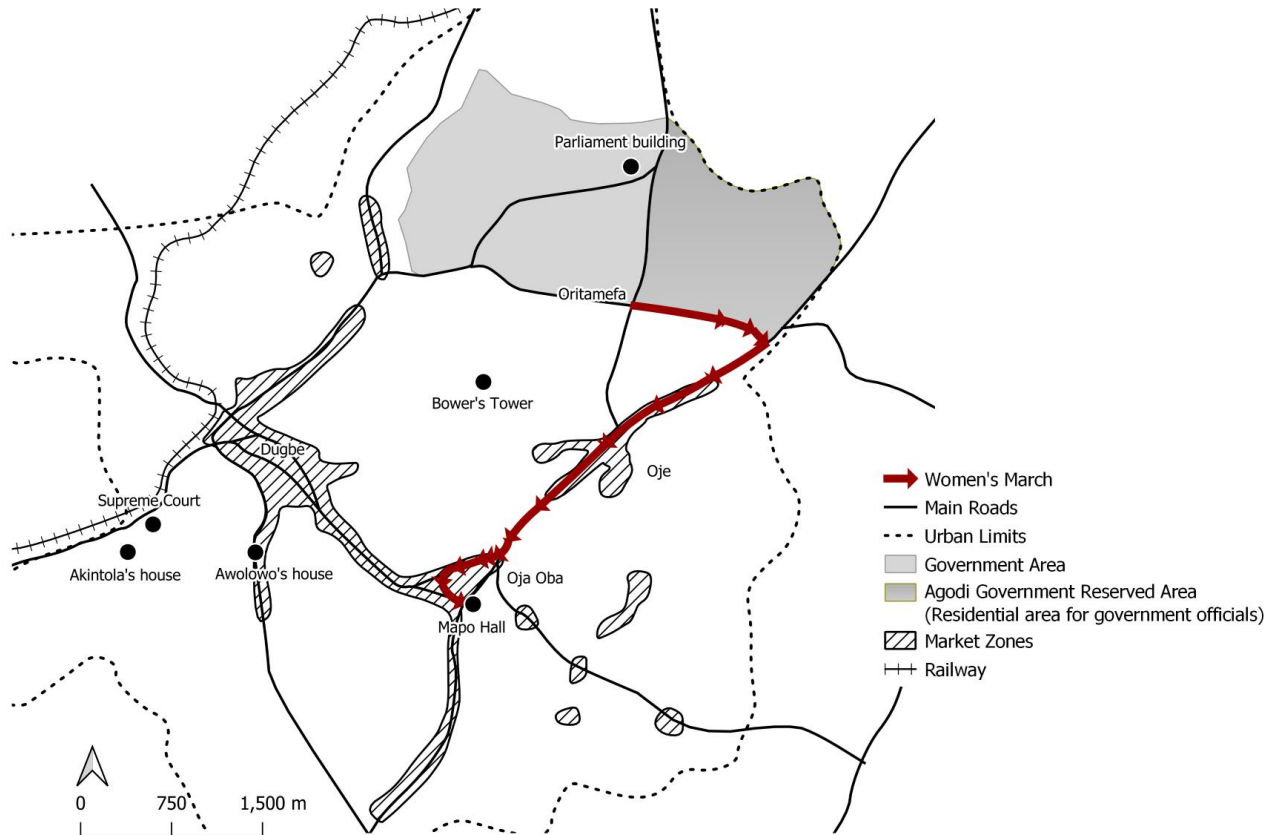
These elections were seen as a "life or death" struggle (Diamond 1988): the UPGA had to win to access decision-making positions, whereas the ruling NNDP needed to expand its popular base to be able to lead without having to face the outbursts of violence that had erupted in the region<sup>24</sup>.

Nevertheless, regional election reports identified irregularities and multiple voting. Both parties self-proclaimed their victory<sup>25</sup>. Eventually, the NNDP was officially declared winner, and a new wave of riots hit the region: electoral fraud was so blatant that UPGA sympathisers had no intention of accepting such a result. Once again, the women, this time with no distinction of class or education, organisers and grassroots activists marching side by side, occupied urban spaces. Political leaders gave them a platform due to their specific positioning: being exempt from the most exacerbated forms of political and physical violence, they became the active and visible arm of the party.

Armed with placards and singing the lyrics mentioned above, UPGA women supporters protested in the city of Ibadan. They used Awolowo's home, located 600 m from Dugbe Market, where many of them had a stall, as a base for their meetings. Heedless of the new law prohibiting public gatherings and defying the soldiers and anti-riot police patrolling the streets of Ibadan in armoured vehicles, they ended up being dispersed with tear gas on several occasions<sup>26</sup>.

They were determined to grab the public's attention and change the course of events. They closed their market stalls and organised several marches in October and November 1965. Their 7 km route departed from the Oritamefa intersection, passed through Agodi GRA, a residential area where many politicians lived, and ended in front of Mapo Hall, the City Hall. The road from Oritamefa to Agodi GRA was the main entry point into the residential area, showing the women's desire to increase their visibility among the authorities. The march then moved on to Oje and Oja Oba markets to mobilise as many market women as possible. Women activists thus marched through several critical intersections in the city, bringing one of the leading commercial arteries to a standstill. The march culminated at the top of Mapo Hill with a gathering in front of the City Hall, a former symbol of colonial power<sup>27</sup>.

**Figure 3: Spatial representation of the Western Region crisis in Ibadan and women's protest marches in 1965<sup>28</sup>**



Moji, a market woman specialising in herbal remedies, recalls these events during an interview in June 2016:

« The women wore their clothes inside out to meet them [the government], they sang abusive songs [...]. When the government wanted to start [the harassment], the ones with grey hair, grey hair, those with grey hair uncovered their head, the very old ones. They also wore *yèrì*. They were not standing naked. [...] and they did not wear any top [*bùbá*] They showed them their breast: « Didn't you suck our breast? Whether or not you did come out of our private parts? [...] Are we not the ones that breast-fed you? Are we not the one that backed you? » That was why, they wore *yèrì* to the market. »

Adepoju continues:

« [during the marches] we didn't tie our wrapper neatly, our clothes were torn inside out: we tied our òjá round the waist. We tied it, we then said we will also seek vengeance. [...] Moreover, we did not wear shoes so that they could suffer. »

The two activists go over several modes of protest used during these marches: wearing clothes inside out, showing signs of struggle and exposing parts of the body. Most of the marchers went barefoot and wore the *yèrì*, a short ample wrapper usually worn by women as underwear, in the privacy of their homes. In this public event, they tied it inside out. By dressing this way, the activists were disregarding the usual dress code, indicating their mistrust and lack of regard for these male politicians. Public appearances in inappropriate attire or an outfit reserved for the domestic context were then turned into a language of political shaming thrown at their opponents. According to Adepoju's testimony, this was also meant to be a show of anger: by walking barefoot, they suffered on purpose to shame their opponents, making them feel guilty for the pain they were causing the women to endure.

During these marches, women also wore the *òjá*, a kind of baby carrier in the shape of a scarf, in an unusual way: they used it to tie their wrapper around their waist. In a Yoruba language theatre play published in 1973, playwright Duro Ladipo underlines the fact that, before colonial times, when women were aware that they were about to get into battle, they would tighten the *òjá* around their waist to firmly hold their skirt on their body, as opposed to an ordinary wrapper which can easily get untied<sup>29</sup>. By tightening their wrapper with the *òjá*, UPGA women supporters were symbolically preparing for clashes and making this known to the entire city and to political opponents in the meeting rooms where they were deciding on the political fate of the region. This foreshadowed a direct and imminent confrontation, pending any political response to the crisis.

The baring of two body parts – the head and the breasts – also became a political tool to be used in the vicinity of places of power at the end of marches. In popular Yoruba culture, the head is both a part of the body (*orí òde*) viewed as the container of the person's destiny and a physical manifestation of an inner spiritual element in the outside world (*orí inú*). The latter can be described as a point of contact between the individual and spiritual powers (Babatunde 2000, 94). In line with this

understanding of the head as a locus of spiritual power, baring women's heads was understood as a sign of protest and admonition.

Deprived of its erotic power and performed this time by older women or mothers, the exposure of breasts in Yoruba public space is described as a curse by the market women interviewed as part of this research. Older post-menopausal women often displayed their bodies as symbols of procreation, reminding those to whom this protest was destined that they came from these bodies. In a context where respect for age hierarchies is paramount (Oyewumi 1997), older women's exposure to their bodies challenged the social order. These protest performances connected to women's partial or complete nakedness are a mode of struggle used in several West African pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial contexts to pressure men into taking action and facing their responsibilities<sup>30</sup>. The exposure of breasts but also the numerous protest performances (such as barefoot marches, the wearing of clothes inside out, signs of struggle, bare heads) are feminine modes of action aiming to shake the foundations of the society and foreshadow an intensification of the struggle if men do not put an end to the violence. In this episode, however, compared to other case studies, the use of nakedness as a tool was combined with a political orientation: women activists used it exclusively to address ruling party politicians, seen as the direct culprits in this crisis. These modes of protest were effective because they were performed in an urban space within which existed a shared culture and where the significance of this coded language could be understood. Another, perhaps even more essential element to consider was that Ibadan was the centre of political power. Women were, therefore, able to directly address those who were identified as responsible for the crisis. Women's anger acted as social glue: an unusual mingling across class boundaries within political parties' women's wings was at play during these marches. Regardless of their level of education or socio-professional background, activists were marching together towards a place of power. Together, they occupied Mapo Hall, a political space historically designed for colonial officers and later male politicians, thus creating a temporary shift in the gender and class spatial allocation. Other marches would follow in towns near Lagos and in the suburb of Mushin.<sup>31</sup>

After these events, ferocious repression rained down on them: thugs hired by the NNDP burnt down the UPGA's *Nigerian Tribune* headquarters in Ibadan, several journalists were arrested, and the



newspaper was banned. The Nigerian Army's fourth battalion occupied the streets of Ibadan, where a curfew was established. The NNDP women's wing decried the protests in the press while stressing that peace had to be restored in the region<sup>32</sup>.

***Figure 4: UPGA Women « Haters of Peace »<sup>33</sup>***

This fierce repression did lead to a break in the UPGA's activities. However, at the end of November, the confirmation that ballot rigging had occurred launched the crisis's final and most violent phase. It moved outside the city with physical confrontations involving both men and women. The conventions of gendered repertoires of action became completely obsolete: it was time to go for broke.

**“Douse them with petrol”: violence outside Ibadan brings men and women on the same page**

During the final months of the crisis, from November 1965 to January 1966, the streets resonated with the shouts of “wet-i-e”. A mix of the English verb “to wet” and Yoruba, this rallying cry meaning “douse them with petrol” was hurled by UPGA activists giving the green light to torching their political opponents' homes, members of the NNDP. They would then splash them with petrol using manual spray pumps whose usual function was to spray pesticides on cocoa trees (Diamond 1988, 269). This method revealed the appearance of a new group that had so far not been very active in the opposition: cocoa farmers (primarily men) who came to lend a hand to grassroots UPGA activists. The NNDP kept cocoa prices high before the elections to avoid hostility from rural constituencies. Following the elections, prices of the region's “black gold” dropped by around 50%, causing farmers to rally behind the UPGA. The government subsequently lost control of the region. The federal Prime Minister sent in some troops to support the NNDP but refused to declare a state of emergency. The UPGA opposition moved the majority of the riots to locations outside the city of Ibadan, to smaller towns or roads with less military presence. There, NNDP supporters' homes were more accessible, and personal attacks could be carried out more easily.<sup>34</sup> The palace of the King of Ijebu, who was married to NNDP women's wing leader Elizabeth Adekogbe, was almost set on fire. This attempted arson was explicitly directed against her<sup>35</sup>.

Across the region, NNDP supporters were locked up in houses and burnt alive. NNDP politicians were stopped on roads leading to Ibadan and killed. NNDP political meetings were dispersed by members of the opposition who attacked them with machetes and kidnapped political leaders and their wives<sup>36</sup>.

Meanwhile, NNDP activists sat back. They could count on the police to protect them. The contemporary press was awash with a nearly daily litany of their calls to peace, asking the police to arrest members of the opposition for restoring order in the region. Opposition women, as shown in the excerpt quoted at the beginning of this article, were urged to stop their marches in the city and the assassinations outside the city, to lead by example and fall in line by returning to a peaceful and nurturing feminine order.<sup>37</sup> For their part, the men in government positions doubled down on official repression and other types of the crackdown. More and more UPGA members faced arrests and trials, while beatings and assassinations became commonplace<sup>38</sup>.

Owing to the federal government's inability to bring the region to order and exercise control, a group of soldiers from the South-East of the country decided to band together to take up this task. A military coup was staged at the federal level, with several assassinations of political figures being orchestrated on 15 January 1966. Akintola was among those killed by this group of soldiers, he met his death at his Ibadan home<sup>39</sup>. Thus, the Western Region crisis ended in bloodshed, and Nigeria entered thirteen years of military rule<sup>40</sup>.

## **Conclusion**

Through an analysis of men's and women's political mobilisation in the city of Ibadan during the 1962-1966 political crisis, this article explored the gendered politicisation of urban spaces by highlighting both parliamentary events and other public spaces that were politicised for a definite period of time. As the point of origin of these clashes, the city of Ibadan was an iconic case: several forms of violence coexisted with a gendered dimension of activism insofar as the city served as the regional headquarters of women's wings of political parties.

Home to the seat of political power as well as a robust military presence, Ibadan witnessed an unusual division of political labour. As the men who used to hold the helm of parties in the Parliament were imprisoned or in hiding within domestic spaces, it fell upon different classes of women to occupy public space, which in turn shaped their new roles in the parties. The perception of parties as a masculine political space and the idea of an urban threat from men turned them into targets of direct police brutality. Women party members were thus able to carve out a wider room for manoeuvre in the city, which they used for political ends. In the initial phases of the crisis (1962-1964), which was first circumscribed to public buildings before spilling onto the streets and markets, while UPGA male activists hid away in private spaces and female leaders toured the region to promote UPGA propaganda, grassroots UPGA women activists, mostly market women, chose to avoid direct protest in the city. They roamed their daily haunts (the markets, the streets, their residential neighbourhoods) and performed their usual political roles (songs and propaganda), albeit with a new twist, through the use of mockery. This enabled them to express their political views and protect their male counterparts and the women's organisers of the opposition party.

In the second phase of the crisis (1965-1966), the spatial boundaries surrounding political action were shattered. UPGA women activists from several social backgrounds blocked Ibadan's economy. They went on to strategically occupy Mapo Hall, a key location in the city that was designed for colonial leaders before being used by male elected officials. In this space, they resorted to the power of defiant disrobing – for older women – and to the power of subverting symbolic Yoruba social norms of respectability expressed through dress – for younger ones – to intensify the struggle. As several scholars have shown, these forms of political participation do not denote a relegation of women to secondary roles in politics but instead carry political meaning in their own right (Viti 2004, Diabate 2020). In the last and sharper phase of the crisis, riots moved outside the city's boundaries. Gendered urban assignations were no longer considered, with men and women joining their efforts in mixed protests.

This intense political crisis has caused various political tools to flourish, leading to dynamic reconfigurations of gendered spatial hierarchies and the division of political labour in the city. Although Ibadan constitutes a unique case in Nigeria, this reflection is an open call to analyse

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possible reconfigurations of activist spaces and political labour in other urban contexts during times of crisis. By examining different types of political action adopted by activists in a repressive urban landscape, this article is also an invitation to underline women's role in political crisis episodes, where men are often considered the main or even the only protagonists. The suggestion to look beyond ordinary stakeholders, places and performances of political action unveils a world of urban modes of protest, whether conventional or untrodden that have considerably impacted the country's history.

## Endnote

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Professor Olutayo Adesina for guiding me during this research in Ibadan.

<sup>2</sup> This article is a slightly revised version of an article initially published in French in a peer-reviewed journal: « Le genre des violences politiques en ville. L'espace public d'Ibadan à l'épreuve de la crise de l'Ouest au Nigéria (1962-1966) », *Histoire Urbaine*, 19 p. I thank Professor Laurent Fourchard, Professor Odile Goerg and anonymous reviewers whose suggestions significantly improved the paper.

<sup>3</sup> *Daily Sketch* (DS), "Role of UPGA Women in West Riots Condemned", 11 November 1965.

<sup>4</sup> A number of women were active members of political parties although they were outnumbered by men and, with a few exceptions, they did not hold key roles (Mba 1982). Outside formal political parties, women of different social classes were extremely active in women's associations (Panata 2020).

<sup>5</sup> From 1954, each of these three regions was governed by a Premier, the head of executive power in the region.

<sup>6</sup> The events mentioned here led to the 1966 coup d'état which put an end to this cycle of political violence before descending in turn into a civil war (1967-1970) (Oloko 2007)

<sup>7</sup> In 1952, out of 1,651,000 residents in Ibadan province, including 833,849 men and 816,277 women, 127,451 women were engaged in market trading, as compared to 56,142 men. Ministry of Economic Planning and Community Development, *Western Nigerian Statistical Bulletin*, 1960.

<sup>8</sup> With a few exceptions: Mackintosh 1966, Sklar 1966, Diamond 1988, Oloko 2007. See also Olutayo Adesina's current research.

<sup>9</sup> See: <https://www.britishpathe.com/pages/who-we-are>.

<sup>10</sup> To protect the identity of these women, they will be mentioned only by their first names in this paper. Interviews are quoted in English translation.

<sup>11</sup> I will not dwell on these internal rivalries within the AG, which are already widely documented (Diamond 1988).

<sup>12</sup> DS, "Ibadan Market Women Protest", 28 September 1964; interview with Adepoju, Abike, Moji, Ibadan, 2016.

<sup>13</sup> Alaga family photo collection. Caption: "Alhaja with other women after a meeting". From left to right: Madam Humuani Alade, HID Awolowo, Alhaja Humuani Alaga, unknown. 1950s.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Adepoju, Ibadan, 2016. Adepoju was born in the 1940s in Ibadan, more precisely in Gege, in the Oja Oba market area. She has been a flour trader at Dugbe Market since the 1960s.

<sup>15</sup> Sopolu Library, File No. 277, AG Itinerary of Tour Undertaken by Chief Mrs HID Awolowo, 1963-1964; File No. 501, Chief Mrs Awolowo Political Tour of Western Region 1963-1964.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Adepoju, Ibadan, 2016.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Moji, Ibadan, 2016. Moji is a market woman at Oje Market, in the herbs section. She was born in the 1940s.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Abike, Ibadan, 2016. Abike is a trader at Dugbe Market, in the cooking utensils section. She was born in the 1940s.

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- <sup>19</sup> On the capacity for protest songs to bring activists together while evading censorship thanks to their volatile nature, see Bertho 2020.
- <sup>20</sup> *Daily Times*, (DT), “Ibadan Market Women Protest”, 28 September 1964.
- <sup>21</sup> *Nigerian Tribune*, (NT), “Ibadan Women Plan Strike”, 13 October 1964.
- <sup>22</sup> DT, “Women Plan 3-day Fast”, 9 October 1965.
- <sup>23</sup> DS, “Women Campaigns”, 10 October 1965.
- <sup>24</sup> British Pathé, “Western Nigeria: Police And Troops Out In Force At Regional Elections.”, 12 October 1965.
- <sup>25</sup> Nwankwo and Ifejika 1969, 91 quoted in Diamond 1988, 340.
- <sup>26</sup> DS, “Ibadan Demonstrating Market Women Were Teargassed Yesterday Morning at Oke Bola”, 26 October 1965; DT, “Police, Women, Clash in Ibadan. Protest March”, 29 October 1965.
- <sup>27</sup> Interviews with Moji and Adepoju.
- <sup>28</sup> Map designed with QGIS, with Vincent Hiribarren’s kind assistance. Source: “Business Districts and Markets”, “Residential Pattern of Ibadan in the 1960s” in Falola 2012. Politicians’ homes and torched houses could not be located.
- <sup>29</sup> Duro Ladipo’s play tells the story of the legendary Yoruba queen Moremi Ajasoro who is said to have lived in the twelfth century. In the play, she says “I, who tightened my belt (*òjà*)”. With this sentence, she means that she got ready for battle by tying her wrapper appropriately (Ladipo 1973, 5).
- <sup>30</sup> See for example the Women’s War in South-West Nigeria in 1929 or the Anlu rebellion between 1958 and 1961 in Cameroon. Just like in Ibadan, women used a mix of political tools (songs, disrobing, specific symbols) to attract the attention of colonial officers. Similarly, the Mmpbomme ritual used between Ghana and Côte d’Ivoire is part of a repertoire used by women to express their anger (Konde 1990, Jones 1993, Fallon and Moreau 2006). In the case being presented here, there is no reference to an old ritual performed by women. Instead, the women make use of several feminine performances at various points in a crisis involving both men and women. For a very comprehensive study on women’s naked protests in Africa, see Diabate 2020.
- <sup>31</sup> British Pathé, “Aftermath of Political Riots in Lagos Suburbs”, 16 October 1965, British Pathé, “Cars Burned in Lagos as Part of Alleged Political Extortion Racket”, 5 November 1965.
- <sup>32</sup> DS, « Role of UPGA Women in West Riots Condemned », 11 November 1965; DS, « Thompson Raps UPGA Women », 25 November 1965.
- <sup>33</sup> WAP, « Madam Apampa blasts UPGA women demonstrators », 2 November 1965.
- <sup>34</sup> Waves of violence hit several smaller towns, located for the most part in Ijebu province (Awolowo’s home province): Ijebu, Ijebu-Remo, Ijebu-Ode, Ijebu-Igbo, Ijebu-Mushin, Ijebu-Ilesha, Iwoye, Ere, Ikenne, Owu, Ikija, Ilaro, Esa-Oke, Itele, Odogbolu and Mushin.
- <sup>35</sup> DS, “Bid to Burn Palace Foiled”, 23 November 1965.
- <sup>36</sup> NT, “2 Women Burnt Dead”, 30 November 1965; DS, “Worshippers Run for Dear Life”, 30 November 1965, DS, “25 Houses Burnt Down”, 1 December 1965.
- <sup>37</sup> DS, “Role of UPGA Women in West Riots Condemned”, 11 November 1965.
- <sup>38</sup> DS, “Ilesha Women Told to Wait”, 12 November 1965.
- <sup>39</sup> British Pathé, “Nigeria: Ibadan Scenes – Downfall of Premier 16mm Lib”, 23 January 1966, 1m26s-1m42.

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<sup>40</sup> British Pathé, “Nigeria: Regional Capital of Western Nigeria Quiet Again After Days of Looting, Arson And Murder”, 22 January 1966.