

**Urban Resistance and Power-Politics: (Re) examining the  
1916 Water Rate Protest in Colonial Lagos, Nigeria**

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**Kohol Sylvester<sup>1</sup>**

Department of History and International Studies,  
Redeemer's University,  
Ede, Osun State, Nigeria.

**Akinbohun Peter<sup>2</sup>**

Department of History and International Studies,  
Redeemer's University,  
Ede, Osun State, Nigeria

**Alabi Oludayo<sup>3</sup>**

Department of History,  
Sikiru Adetona College of Education,  
Science and Technology. SACOETEC  
(Formerly Tai Solarin College of Education),  
Omu Ajose, Ogun State. Nigeria Email

**Co Authors**

**Ola-Ade Oluwatise Peace<sup>4</sup>; Aniefiok Magdalene Itorobong<sup>5</sup>; Attah  
Oluwanifemi Precious<sup>6</sup>**

Department of History and International Studies,  
Redeemer's University,  
Ede, Osun State, Nigeria.

**Abstract**

Examples abound of several protests by the masses against the government in Nigeria. Most of these protests are usually targeted against certain governmental or non-governmental policies and reforms. And most of these protests are organised by labour unions and socio-political movements in the form of petition writing and physical demonstrations or riots. For example, the 1897 Lagos Protest was organised by the Public Works Department (PWD), and the 1899 Badagry Protest was organised by canoe and fishermen association. However, it should be noted that most of these modern-day protests in Nigeria seem to be a replication of the colonial scenario. This is because of the nature and systemic dimensions of the post-colonial governmental and non-governmental agencies. These agencies by default, still exhibit the 'master and

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<sup>1</sup> Email: kohols@run.edu.ng

<sup>2</sup> Redeemer's University, Ede, Osun State, Nigeria.

<sup>3</sup>: alabioludayo@gmail.com.

<sup>4</sup> Department of History and International Studies, Redeemer's University, Ede, Osun State, Nigeria. Email: opeace833@gmail.com

<sup>5</sup>Department of History and International Studies, Redeemer's University, Ede, Osun State, Nigeria. Email: aniefiok12418@run.edu.ng

<sup>6</sup> Department of History and International Studies, Redeemer's University, Ede, Osun State, Nigeria. Email: oluwanifemip897@gmail.com



servant mentality' which was the hallmark of the colonial authorities. Indeed, the 1991 protest in Lagos against water rate was almost a direct replication of the 1916 Water Rate Protest during the colonial era. Thus, it is against this backdrop that this research examines the nature and dimensions of the 1916 Water Rate Protest in colonial Lagos, paying close attention to the diplomacy played by the various groups that were involved in the protest. This study utilises the multidisciplinary method. However, it dwells heavily on the historical approach and the interpretive design. Both primary and secondary sources were used. Relevant literature was also explored to give a robust background on existing works in the area of protest movements in Nigeria and Lagos. Findings from this study reveal that there was a high-level diplomacy involved in the 1916 Water Rate protest in colonial Lagos. This paper concludes that the leadership of most protest unions is equally guilty of what they claim to be fighting against.

**Keywords:** Water Rate, Protest, colonial Lagos, Nigeria

### **Introduction**

There are several protests and protest movements organised by the masses against the government in Nigeria. Most of these protests are usually targeted against certain governmental or non-governmental policies and reforms. And most of these protests are organised by labour unions and socio-political movements in the form of petition writing and physical demonstrations or riots. For example, there was the 1897 Lagos Protest organised by the Public Works Department (PWD), and the 1899 Badagry Protest organised by canoe and fishermen association<sup>7</sup>. However, it should be noted that most of these modern-day protests in Nigeria seem to be a replication of the colonial scenario. This is because of the nature and systemic dimensions of the post-colonial governmental and non-governmental agencies. These agencies, by default, still exhibit the 'master and servant mentality', which was the hallmark of the colonial authorities. Indeed, the 1991 protest in Lagos against the water rate was almost a direct replication of the 1916 Water Rate Protest during the colonial era. Thus, it is against this backdrop that this research examines the nature and dimensions of the 1916 Water Rate Protest in colonial Lagos, paying close attention to the diplomacy played by the various groups that were involved in the protest. This study utilises the multidisciplinary method. However, it dwells heavily on the historical approach, as well as the interpretive design. Both primary and secondary sources were used. Relevant literature was also explored to give a robust background on existing works in the area of protest movements in Nigeria and Lagos.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Protest movements are essential vehicles through which citizens articulate grievances and demand socio-political change. In Nigeria, a country plagued by persistent governance issues, economic disparities, and human rights abuses, protests have become recurring expressions of popular dissatisfaction. To

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<sup>7</sup>Anthony G. Hopkins, Anthony G. "The Lagos Strike of 1897: An Exploration in Nigerian Labor History." In *Peasants and Proletarians*, pp. 87-106. Routledge, 2023.

understand the motivations, dynamics, and outcomes of these movements, scholars employ various theoretical lenses. This research explores two key theories that provide a robust framework for analysing protest movements in Nigeria: Relative Deprivation Theory and Resource Mobilisation Theory. These frameworks not only shed light on the structural and psychological underpinnings of protests but also help unpack the mechanisms through which citizens mobilise to challenge authority.

### Relative Deprivation Theory

Relative Deprivation Theory, primarily advanced by sociologist Ted Robert Gurr<sup>8</sup> in his seminal work *Why Men Rebel*, posits that social movements and protests arise when individuals or groups perceive a significant gap between their expectations and their actual living conditions. According to Gurr, it is not absolute poverty that drives people to rebel, but rather the perception that they are being denied what they believe they rightfully deserve, especially when compared to others or to their own past conditions. A historical example is the *Ali Must Go* protests of 1978<sup>9</sup>. University students across Nigeria led these protests against the increase in feeding and accommodation fees under the military regime of General Olusegun Obasanjo. The students perceived the increase as unjust, particularly in light of Nigeria's oil wealth at the time. These expectations, rooted in the promise of a welfare-oriented post-independence state, clashed with the stark reality of economic hardship and state repression<sup>10</sup>.

More recently, the #EndSARS movement of 2020 exemplifies the relevance of the Relative Deprivation Theory. Although triggered by widespread police brutality by the now-defunct Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), the protests reflected broader grievances, including youth unemployment, systemic corruption, and poor governance. Nigerian youth, often educated and digitally connected, expressed frustration over their lack of opportunities in a country rich in natural and human resources. The visible opulence of political elites juxtaposed with the suffering of ordinary citizens exacerbated feelings of deprivation, thereby fueling mass mobilisation. The collective perception of betrayal by the state was a powerful motivator for the nationwide protests.

Critically, while Relative Deprivation Theory effectively explains the psychological triggers of protest, it may not sufficiently account for the organisational and logistical aspects of mobilisation. Many societies experience deprivation without resulting in organised resistance, indicating the necessity of complementary frameworks that address movement structure.

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<sup>8</sup>Stephen G. Brush, "Dynamics of Theory Change in the Social Sciences: Relative Deprivation and Collective Violence" *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 40, 1996.

<sup>9</sup>NsirimovuOkwuwada, "Protests and Riots in Nigeria; Applications and Implication for National Economic Transformation" MPRA Paper No. 124570, 25 Apr 2025.

<https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de> Accessed: 20<sup>th</sup> May, 2025.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

### Resource Mobilisation Theory

To address the limitations of Relative Deprivation Theory, scholars turn to Resource Mobilisation Theory, which shifts focus from grievances to the practical means through which protest movements organise. This theory, developed by John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald in the 1970s<sup>11</sup>, argues that the success and sustainability of social movements depend on their ability to acquire and effectively use resources—financial, human, technological, and organisational.

In Nigeria, the resource mobilisation perspective provides critical insight into how protests are planned, executed, and sustained. The Occupy Nigeria movement of 2012<sup>12</sup> is a pertinent example. This movement arose in response to the removal of fuel subsidies by the administration of President Goodluck Jonathan. Although economic grievances were central, the protest's success in attracting widespread participation was primarily due to effective coordination by civil society organisations, trade unions, and online platforms. The Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC)<sup>13</sup>, social media influencers, and youth-led organisations collaborated to organise strikes, street protests, and online campaigns. Here, access to digital technology and organisational infrastructure enabled protesters to mobilise across ethnic, religious, and regional lines—a rare feat in Nigerian politics.

Similarly, during the #EndSARS protests<sup>14</sup>, digital tools played a crucial role in logistics, fundraising, and awareness. Organisations like the Feminist Coalition managed crowdfunding efforts transparently, providing legal aid, medical support, and food for protesters. The decentralised structure of the movement made it resilient against state attempts to suppress leadership. This demonstrates that beyond grievances, the capacity to mobilise resources significantly shapes a movement's efficacy and reach.

Nonetheless, Resource Mobilisation Theory has its limitations. It may overlook the emotive, ideological, or cultural dimensions of protest that are crucial in contexts like Nigeria, where collective identity and historical memory often shape mobilisation. Moreover, this theory presumes a rational cost-benefit analysis by protestors, which may not always align with the spontaneous or emotionally driven nature of many protests.

For scholars, policymakers, and civil society actors, understanding these theoretical frameworks is crucial. It enables a nuanced analysis of protest dynamics and offers insights into how the Nigerian state can respond more constructively to dissent. Addressing the structural roots of deprivation while

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<sup>11</sup> John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald, "Resource Mobilization and Social Movements: A Partial Theory". *American Journal of Sociology* 82, 1977.

<sup>12</sup> Kudus Oluwatoyin Adebayo, *Occupy-Nigeria Movement, Organised Labour Unions and Oil-Subsidy Struggle: An Analysis of Processes in Media(ted) 'Revolution' and its Demise*. (Lexington Books: Ibadan, 2015).

<sup>13</sup> Ibid

<sup>14</sup> Sharon Adetutu and Ololade Faniyi, "The End SARS Women's Coalition: Exploring the Persistence of Women's Movements through Feminist Generations". *Feminist Africa. Net* (Accessed 11<sup>th</sup> May, 2025).

also opening democratic spaces for organised civic engagement remains essential for the country's political development.

### Review of Relevant Literature

Protest demonstrations are a means of holding dissents or expressing discontent through public marches, with the right to protest being enshrined in Article 11 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and other international laws.<sup>15</sup> Acknowledging the legitimacy of protests, Olukayode Eesuola, exercises that this right is not without limitations, particularly in era of terrorism. He argues in this paper that while laws checking the activities of protests may be inevitable in our increasingly terrorised world, their enforcement can also be manipulated for sectional political and even anti-political advantages, depending on the state in question and the quality of its judiciary.

Eesuola further posits that the case of Nigeria is holistically against protest demonstrations and subjects all forms of public gatherings to political colouration, with individuals in Nigeria hijacking political power to suppress and oppress their opponents<sup>16</sup>. Governors of states and their cohorts use the Public Order Act to intimidate protesters whose demonstrations were against them but protect those whose demonstrations are against their opponents<sup>17</sup>. Consequentially, Eesuola notes that protest will continue in human polity for a long time as it is a normal human reaction to power relations in society, however, he further notes that terrorism and other forms of insecurity are spreading and suggests making or amending laws regulating protest demonstrations through the law, and attempts should be undertaken to guarantee that these regulations are not exploited for personal or collective benefits<sup>18</sup>.

Anthony G. Hopkins' book chapter, "The Lagos Strike of 1897: An Exploration in Nigerian Labour History," in *Peasants and Proletarians*<sup>19</sup>, provides a scholarly analysis of Nigeria's first main colonial labour-related strike action. This study,

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<sup>15</sup> Olukayode Eesuola. "Protest Demonstrations, Political Participation and the Law in the Era of Terrorism: Nigeria's Public Order Act and the United States's HR 347 in Perspectives", *International Journal of Arts and Humanities*, vol. 4, no. 2, (April 2015); 28-41. For additional information see: African Union. *African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights*. Adopted June 27, 1981, entered into force October 21, 1986. Article 11. Accessed [23 May 2025]. <https://achpr.au.int/index.php/en/charter/african-charter-human-and-peoples-rights>; United Nations. *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. Adopted December 10, 1948. Article 20. Accessed [23 May 2025]. <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>; United Nations. *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*. Adopted December 16, 1966, entered into force March 23, 1976. Article 21. Accessed [23 May 2025]. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights>.

<sup>16</sup> Olukayode Eesuola. "Protest Demonstrations, Political Participation and the Law in the Era of Terrorism: Nigeria's Public Order Act and the United States's HR 347 in Perspectives"...

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Anthony G. Hopkins, Anthony G. "The Lagos Strike of 1897: An Exploration in Nigerian Labor History." In *Peasants and Proletarians*, pp. 87-106. Routledge, 2023.

which was first published in 1966, remains pivotal in the historiography of labour studies not only in Nigeria but Africa as a whole.

Hopkins, given his background in the field of History, methodically reconstructs the 1897 strike by Public Works Department (PWD) labourers<sup>20</sup>, who protested the obnoxious wage reductions and extended working hours imposed by the colonial authority led by Governor Henry McCallum in Lagos. Drawing from his experiences in Asia, McCallum misinterpreted African labour patterns, believing that Africans, especially Lagosians, were inherently lazy and would work only to meet negligible needs. However, Hopkins demonstrates that Lagos's workforce had alternative employment opportunities, making them less dependent on colonial wages. The strike, involving approximately 3,000 workers, culminated in concessions from the colonial administration, including the abandonment of wage cuts and the introduction of a lunch break<sup>21</sup>.

Indeed, this case study challenges prevailing colonial narratives and underscores the agency of African workers, using the case of Lagos. Hopkins situates the strike within the broader transition from slave to wage labour, highlighting the interplays of labour relations in the early phase of colonial rule in Nigeria. His work laid the groundwork for subsequent studies on African labour movements and continues to be a fundamental reference in the field<sup>22</sup>. Adesina, Oluwakemi, Jacob Adesina, Ndidi Olibamoyo, and Yemisi Disu's 2024 article, "Silent Protests, Loud Impact: Madam Alimotu Pelewura (1865–1951) and Women's Activism in Colonial Lagos, Nigeria," published in the *African Historical Review*<sup>23</sup>, presents an assessment of women's political agency in colonial Lagos.

They focus on Madam Alimotu Pelewura, the *Iyaloja* (leader of market women) and head of the Lagos Market Women's Association (LMWA), highlighting her essential role in anti-colonial nationalist struggles against calculated oppression and dispossession. Drawing from her tactical leadership skills, Pelewura was able to mobilise market women to resist colonial policies such as price control and taxation, aligning with nationalist political parties and traditional aristocracy to intensify their influence. The article underscores how these "silent protests" significantly impacted Lagos's political landscape, challenging patriarchal structures and colonial authority<sup>24</sup>.

By situating Pelewura's activism within the broader context of women's resistance movements in Nigeria, the study illuminates the enduring implication of market women's roles in shaping both colonial and post-colonial governance. It contributes to a deeper understanding of gendered political dynamics and the legacy of women's collective action in Nigerian history.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid

<sup>23</sup>Oluwakemi Adesina, Jacob Adesina, Ndidi Olibamoyo, and Yemisi Disu. "Silent Protests, Loud Impact: Madam Alimotu Pelewura (1865–1951) and Women's Activism in Colonial Lagos, Nigeria." *African Historical Review* 55, no. 2 (2024): 81-104.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

Solomon Hari, in the article "The Evolution of Social Protest in Nigeria: The Role of social media in the "#OccupyNigeria" Protest",<sup>25</sup> analyses the concept of social protest and the impacts of the use of social media during protests in Nigeria. Tracing the origin of social protest to the colonial era, he states that the colonial period saw an upsurge in nationalists' movements and resistance against the colonial authorities. These movements, largely carried out by the youth population, served as an advocacy for social change and development. Hari posits that these movements now metamorphosed into an organised labour union in Nigeria, have served as a voice against hostile government policies. In this article, Hari states that the government's response to these social demonstrations is either physical through the use of force or non-physical by implementing draconian laws and policies.

Furthermore, Hari assesses the impact of social media on the outcome of social protests in Nigeria using the case study of #OccupyNigeria, which was a protest against the removal of fuel subsidies by President Goodluck Jonathan. Although, the protest did not see many physical demonstrations, but with the use of social media platforms, the protests gained the approval of the average Nigerian citizenry. Hari argues that social media is an effective tool in mobilising social actions, given that the world is more technologically inclined than it was in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Hari posits that social media served as a platform for Nigeria's both at home and in diaspora, celebrities across various industries to unite against one cause. He further states that while the government-owned broadcasting agencies refused to give any coverage to the protest, social media platforms became the voice of the people. The protest became so intense that the president had to close down his Facebook account because of the online slander.

Subsequently, the #OccupyNigeria's use of social media sparked a revolution across Nigeria, as it served as an open platform for Nigerians to vent their frustrations and connect against one cause. However, while the use of social media could promote political participation, Hari argues that it has its challenges. The use of social media in staging a social protest could also be misleading, with each user wanting to leverage the period to criticise the government. He also states the government could use the non-physical strategy of blocking the use of social media platforms in repressing the protest.

Samson Ojo, in the article, "From Protest to Progress: Unlocking the Potential of the Nigerian Youth for Political Reform"<sup>26</sup> examines the transformative role of youths in Nigerian politics. It analyses the evolution of youth participation. Ojo states that Nigeria's historical political landscape has been deeply influenced by youth activism and participation. Tracing their involvement in politics to the role played by the Nigerian Youth Movement and the National Council of Nigeria and Cameroon in the fight for independence, Ojo argues that youths

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<sup>25</sup> Solomon Hari, "The Evolution of Social Protest in Nigeria: The Role of Social Media in the #OccupyNigeria Protest," *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention* 3, no.9(2014).

<sup>26</sup> Samson O. Ojo and Adebayo O. Afolaranmi, "From Protest to Progress: Unlocking the Potential of the Nigerian Youth for Political Reform," *British Journal of Multidisciplinary and Advanced Studies* 5, no.4(2024), European Centre for Research Training and Development. (Accessed 3 May 2024).

have long been crucial in Nigeria's political and social struggles. Ojo also highlights their active role in staging protests against the hostile policies of military rule. Youths were instrumental in the quest for a return to democratic rule during Abacha's regime. The National Democratic Coalition and Campaign for Democracy became rallying points for youth activities in reclaiming their democratic rights.

However, in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, Nigeria experienced a huge reduction in the involvement of youths in politics, Ojo states that this was due to economic and institutional barriers. These barriers have made youths feel disconnected from politics, making them lose faith in the Nigerian state. Moreover, cultural and societal norms have discriminated the participation of young women. However, Ojo argues that in recent times, the rise of technology has aided youth activism. With the use of social media, youths again have gained inclusiveness in politics. Using the outpouring of the EndSARS protest in 2020 and the EndBadGovernance protest in 2024, Ojo posits that technology has re-empowered youths to mobilise for political reform and increased youths' engagement in politics. He further argues that the advent of technology has empowered youths to amplify their voices and advocate for political change, in the case of the EndSARS protest, it brought an end to the Special Anti-Robbery Squad. On the other hand, Ojo posits that it could also be misleading and undermines the credibility of legitimate activism.

What has been distilled from this review is that protest has been a form of diplomacy employed by various groups in Nigeria since the colonial era. It has served as a powerful tool for advocating for change and reforms. The critical gap left for this study to fill borders on the fact that none of the existing literature has adequately studied the water rate system and the effects it had on the people during the colonial era, a gap this study aims to bridge by examining the 1916 Water Rate Protest in Lagos.

### **Brief Historical Antecedents of Protest Movements in Nigeria**

The early beginnings of protests and protest movements in Nigeria can be traced to the anti-governmental movements during the colonial period. For example, there were mass protests against the colonial authority in Lagos in 1897, 1903, 1908 and 1915, 1916<sup>27</sup>; in Sapele in 1916; in Latok in 1917, the Aba Women's Riot in 1929, and the Abeokuta Women's Revolt in 1947, just to mention a few<sup>28</sup>. Some of these social movements later snowballed into the early political parties and groups, and their leaders became the forerunners of political activities during this period<sup>29</sup>. Mochizuki (2009) argued that during the nationalist era, the youth movements of the various African colonies began to

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<sup>27</sup> These protests were mainly against the obnoxious colonial tax system. And these protests became a reference point for other protest that later took place during the colonial era and even beyond.

<sup>28</sup> Asogwa, Kenneth Chinedu, Herbert C. Edeh, Anthony Chinonso Ajah, Paul Hezekiah Omeh, Mathias Ikechukwu Asadu, Damian Chimezie Ogbuabor, and Elias C. Ngwu. "The state, End SARS protests and human rights violation in Nigeria." *IKENGA: International Journal of Institute of African Studies* 22, no. 2 (2021).

<sup>29</sup> Ibid

take shape<sup>30</sup>. Throughout the twentieth century and up until the independence era, nationalist thought and activity evolved, drawing inspiration from the early resistance and protest movements against colonial authorities. Their primary goal was to raise national and racial consciousness, particularly in the cities. The most active participants in colonial politics were the youth. The independence struggle was spearheaded by youth action in many West African countries. Students and intellectuals were among the groups that supported social progress and change in these movements.

Organised labour in Nigeria has historically been in the vanguard of social protest against unfavourable government policies<sup>31</sup>. The reaction of the Nigerian state to these protests, especially during the days of military dictatorship, is characterised by violent repression<sup>32</sup> and police brutality, often leading to the deaths of protesters, imprisonment of protest leaders labour leaders and proscription of labour movements and youth groups such as the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC), and National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS). Aborishade (2012), a civil rights activist, explains the strategies used by the Nigerian state in the repression of social protest<sup>33</sup>. He further states that,

Policing of protests by the state in Nigeria is done largely by relying on physical and non-physical violent control strategies. The former strategy involves using direct physical force on protesters, including the employment of poisonous tear-gas, harassment, arrest, detention, torture and all kinds of inhuman treatment. The non-physical strategy involves using draconian laws, rules and regulations that hinder the free exercise of universally recognised fundamental rights of assembly and action<sup>34</sup>.

During the military regimes of General Ibrahim Babangida and General Sani Abacha in the 1990s, social and human rights advocates such as the late Gani Fawehinmi, Beko Ransome-Kuti, and Femi Falana, along with civil society organisations like the Campaign for Democracy (CD), spearheaded large protests and faced numerous hardships and incarcerations throughout this period. Others, such as the Afrobeat legend Fela Anikulapo Ransome-Kuti, employ protest music addressing social issues, corruption, and military oppression to maintain awareness of protest and resistance in people's minds. The #OccupyNigeria protest movement and its utilisation of social media represent another advancement in social protest in Nigeria.

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<sup>30</sup>Mochizuki, K. "Nationalism and Youth Movements in African Colonies: The Rise of Change Agents." In *Colonial Perspectives and Emerging Movements*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

<sup>31</sup>Tar, Usman. *The Politics of Neoliberal Democracy in Africa: State and Civil Society in Nigeria*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2009.

<sup>32</sup> Human Rights Watch (HRW). *Nigeria: The Ogoni Crisis—A Case Study of Military Repression in Southeastern Nigeria*. New York: Human Rights Watch, 1995.

<sup>33</sup>Aborishade, Olusegun. 2012. *State Repression and the Dynamics of Social Protest in Nigeria*. Lagos: Centre for Civil Rights Advocacy.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. P. 4.

### Diplomacy and the Water Rate Protest in Lagos, 1908-1916

The 1991 Lagos protest against the new water rate was a *dejavu* of the 1916 protest by Lagosians against the British colonialists. Scholars have argued that both protests have so many similarities, especially when looking at them from the angle of their cause<sup>35</sup>. Indeed, the announcements of impending hikes in rates of telephone services and domestic water consumption in Lagos remind one of a colonial government in which the objective is high rates and little service. A critical re-examination of the events of the first water rate in Lagos shows that there was deep distrust of the colonial government, if not overt hostility, among all sections of the population. If the colonial government sought to introduce a pipe-borne water scheme in Lagos, it would benefit the white people and ask the Africans to bear the cost. The Africans were unwilling to pay for water, which they had already obtained free from wells and rain<sup>36</sup>.

The effects of colonialism remain in Nigeria today. There is the same distrust of African governments, even after several years of independence. Although traditional society had a system of taxation to support civic projects, the modern government finds resistance and non-compliance to various taxation schemes.

The provision of pipe-borne water was one of the fundamental prerogatives of the colonial authorities. Thus, the decision to erect a pipe-borne water system for Lagos dates back to the late nineteenth century. The Lagos newspaper had pointed out the necessity of pipe-borne water as early as the 1890s<sup>37</sup>. In 1897, the first electric light fixtures were installed. After three members of the African Legislative Council who were not officially recognised fought against imposing taxes to fund the project, indirect taxation was utilised by the government to cover the expenses. The Secretary of State for the Colonies urged that the inhabitants of Lagos pay for the amenity through a charge on properties when a water system for the city was proposed in 1907<sup>38</sup>.

Several incidents served as a prelude to the 1916 Water Rate protest in Lagos. The three African unofficial members of the Legislative Council, the official law-making body for the Lagos Colony and Southern Protectorate of Nigeria, assented to the taxation scheme. The Central Native Council, composed of the traditional chiefs of Lagos to advise the colonial government, strongly opposed the water rate. They preferred to forgo the pipe-borne water scheme if it involved a tax. Public demonstrations against the House Assessment Ordinance occurred on 3 November 1908<sup>39</sup>. Almost all markets in colonial Lagos were closed, and about 10,000 people marched to Government House to express their grievances<sup>40</sup>. This was inspite of the interventions of the traditional rulers *ab initio*. Thus, the traditional rulers blamed the colonial authorities for

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<sup>35</sup>Adefuye, Ade. 1992. *Protests in Lagos: Historical Parallels in Colonial and Post-Colonial Struggles*. Lagos: University of Lagos Press. For additional information see: Smith, Robert S. 1988. *Lagos: History and Protest in the Making of a City*. London: Heinemann.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup>Okonkwo, Rina. "Protest movements in Lagos, 1908-1930." (No Title) (1995).

<sup>38</sup>Okonkwo, Rina. "Protest movements in Lagos, 1908-1930." (No Title) (1995).

<sup>39</sup> Ibid

<sup>40</sup> "The Lagos Water Rate", *African Mail*, 8 January 1909.

ignoring their suggestions, eventually leading to the 1908 incident.

The above incident continued unabated and attracted more protests from specific groups within Lagos. Therefore, on 2 April 1909, 3,000 women met in the traditional quarter of Lagos to discuss the protest against the water rate<sup>41</sup>. The central focus of their meeting was to come up with a clear communique on the way forward regarding the water rate saga in colonial Lagos. Several women speakers suggested a boycott of sales to European firms and to cooks until the government withdrew the water scheme. They also elected head women in all quarters to collect one (1) shilling from women to finance the protest. Apart, from the general effect of the water rate in Lagos, women were seen as the major target. According to the women, if not well managed, the water rate saga could throw them out of business. This was because most of the low-income women were involved in water-carrying as a source of livelihood<sup>42</sup>.

The above argument was further corroborated by *The Lagos Weekly Record* which indicated that women traders would be particularly hard hit by the water rate. It stated that "The female street hawker represents the bottom rung of the trade ladder and the earnings of these sellers hardly exceed 18d to 2/- weekly. After providing for body and soul, could these people, who form the majority, afford to pay a water rate"<sup>43</sup>. Under Governor Egerton's leadership, the colonial government defended the water rate by maintaining that the less privileged were exempted from the policy. And that only residents within a short distance of the public pump that the government provided would pay the water rate. This assurance did not yield any fruit because the populace resisted the water rate<sup>44</sup>.

The traditional rulers and the women, for a very long period, remained at the forefront of the agitations against the water rate saga in colonial Lagos. However, when it was becoming evident that their agitations were not gaining more ground within the corridors of the colonial government the people had to resort to forming alliances. And one such alliance was the Lagos Peoples Union (LPU) of 1908<sup>45</sup>. The Union was a combination of the 'traditional elite' and the educated elite in Lagos. Before its formation, most of the protest groups were predominantly anchored by people regarded as 'illiterates' by the colonialists. Indeed, the relationship between the colonial authorities and the 'illiterates' could be described as parasitic in nature. Thus, the illiterates were "like goats at the mercy of leopards."<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>41</sup>Johnson, Samuel. 1921. *The History of the Yorubas: From the Earliest Times to the Beginning of the British Protectorate*. London: Routledge. For further information on the women's protest of 1909, see: Akintoye, Stephen A. 2010. *A History of the Yoruba People*. Dakar: Amalion Publishing.

<sup>42</sup>Okonkwo, Rina. "Protest movements in Lagos, 1908-1930."

<sup>43</sup>Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid

<sup>45</sup>Okonkwo, Rina. "Protest movements in Lagos, 1908-1930." See also: Cole, Patrick. 1975. *Modern and Traditional Elites in the Politics of Lagos*. London: Cambridge University Press. Sklar, Richard L. 1963. *Nigerian Political Parties: Power in an Emergent African Nation*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

<sup>46</sup>Okonkwo, Rina. "Protest movements in Lagos, 1908-1930."

The Union introduced petition-writing diplomacy in the fight against the water rate in colonial Lagos. Through these tactics, the People's Union was able to call mass meetings and obtain signatures for petitions to the government, which contained their grievances against the water rate policy. The Union was headed by John Randle (1855-1928). He was a wealthy medical doctor in private practice in colonial Lagos. He was born in Regent, Sierra Leone and had his tertiary education at the University of Edinburgh, UK. Shortly after his education, he joined the colonial medical service in 1888. Randle was one of the educated frontliners during the colonial era who took keen interest in the political agitations of the period. He felt a strong sense of obligation toward the less fortunate and gave generously to charity. His political philosophy supported the idea that the educated elite should speak for the others.<sup>47</sup>

The activities of the Union under the leadership of Randle, to a certain extent, affected the narrative of protest movements in colonial Lagos and even beyond. For the first time, the colonial authority proposed introducing a municipal council system in line with other regions in West Africa. This was rejected by the Union owing to the fact that the examples of Accra and Freetown are nothing to write home about. In response to all the agitations, the colonial authority commissioned the Lagos Water Works in 1915<sup>48</sup>. The primary aim of this decision was to bring a lasting solution to the persistent protests ravaging the colony. This move affected the coordination of the Union. However, the Union got a booster from traditional rulers in Lagos.

The several protests and counter-protests against the water rate in Lagos reached their apogee in 1916. On the 18<sup>th</sup> of September 1916, about 10,000 Lagosians held a protest march at the Government House to express their disagreement against the water rate in Lagos<sup>49</sup>. At the end of it all, the colonial government had to succumb to the will of the masses. It is important to note that the protest brought to the fore the intricacies of diplomacy that was ongoing within the population and the colonial authority.

### Conclusion

This paper has argued that the 1991 water rate protest in Lagos, and other protests even in the post-colonial era, seem to be a *dejavu* of the 1916 water rate protest by Lagosians against the British colonialists. Scholars have argued that these protests have so many similarities, especially when looking at them from the angle of its cause. Indeed, the announcements of impending hikes in rates of telephone services and domestic water consumption in Lagos remind one of a colonial government in which the objective is high rates and little service. A critical re-examination of the events of the first water rate protest in Lagos shows that there was deep distrust of the colonial government, if not overt hostility, among all sections of the population. If the colonial government sought to introduce a pipe-borne water scheme in Lagos, it would benefit the

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<sup>47</sup>Ayandele, Emmanuel Ayankanmi. 1974. *The Educated Elite in the Nigerian Society*. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid

<sup>49</sup>Mba, Nina Emma. 1982. *Nigerian Women Mobilized: Women's Political Activity in Southern Nigeria, 1900-1965*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

white people and ask the Africans to bear the cost. The Africans were unwilling to pay for water, which they already obtained free from wells and the rain.

The effects of colonialism remain in Nigeria today. There is the same distrust of African governments, even after several years of independence. Although, traditional society had a system of taxation to support civic projects, the modern government finds resistance and non-compliance to various taxation schemes. Findings from this study reveal a high-level diplomacy level involved in the 1916 Water Rate protest in colonial Lagos. Thus, this paper concludes that the leadership of most protest unions is equally guilty of what they claim to be fighting against.