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"UNVEILING HIDDEN NARRATIVES: REWRITING NIGERIAN HISTORY THROUGH THE LENS OF GENDER" | Professor Aisha Balarabe Bawa

USMANU DANFODIYO UNIVERSITY, SOKOTO

62nd Inaugural Lecture

Titled:

"UNVEILING HIDDEN NARRATIVES: REWRITING NIGERIAN HISTORY THROUGH THE LENS OF GENDER"

By

Professor Aisha Balarabe Bawa
B.A., M.A., Ph.D. (UDUS)
Professor of Gender History
Department of History and International Studies
Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto

On Thursday, 20th August, 2026
Time: 4:30pm
At Emir Zayyanu Auditorium,
Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto

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Delivered under the Chairmanship of:

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Protocol

The Vice-Chancellor
The Deputy Vice-Chancellors,
The Principal Officers of the University,
The Provost CHS
Dean, Faculty of Arts,
Other Deans of Faculties
Distinguished Professors and Scholars,
Directors and Head of Departments
Esteemed Colleagues and Staff
Great Students of Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen

Preamble

An Inaugural Lecture is one of the highest academic traditions in the university system. It provides a new Professor with the opportunity to present the intellectual trajectory of a lifetime of scholarship, demonstrate the significance of their research to the advancement of knowledge, and reflect on its relevance to society. As I prepare this lecture, I was asking myself whether it is really me – the primary school teacher first at Turaki Model Primary School, Sokoto, Family Support Model Primary School (inside Bankanu primary school) Sokoto and Lecturer at College of Basic and Advance Studies Yauri. But here I am, by the grace of Almighty Allah, deeply grateful for the privilege of this journey. This Inaugural lecture "**Unveiling Hidden Narratives: Rewriting**

Nigerian History Through the Lens of Gender", examines how conventional historical narratives have often overlooked the experiences, contributions, and agency of women in the making of Nigerian history. It argues that recovering these neglected histories is essential to a more inclusive understanding of Nigeria's past.

This 62nd Inaugural Lecture is the third from the Department of History and International Studies of this university, following *The Major Landmarks in the History of Hausaland* by late Professor Mahdi Adamu and *The Igbo Factor in the History of Intergroup Relations and Commerce in Kano* by Professor Ahmed Bako. Both lectures examined dimensions of our shared past that have shaped how we understand community, trade, and interaction in this region. It is in that same spirit of uncovering and reinterpreting Nigeria's history that I offer this lecture, this time turning our attention to a dimension that has, until recently, received comparatively less scholarly attention: the place of gender and women.

One of the reasons that inspired my choice of this topic came from reading Obaro Ikime's *Can Anything Good Come Out of History*?[1] In the dedication of that text, Professor Ikime wrote movingly about his wife of fifty-years, describing her as a: "...wife, lover, friend, mother, house maker, housekeeper par excellence, great cook, worshipper and mediator." He went further to acknowledge that he and his children had been the primary beneficiaries of her

[1] O. Ikime, "Can Anything Good Come Out of History?," Lectures and Papers on Nigerian History, Ibadan: Bookcraft, 2018, vii.

extraordinary talents and gifts. As I reflected on these profound words, a deeply troubling historiographical question arose in my mind. If women occupy such central, foundational positions in our homes, our families, our communities, and even in the private lives of our greatest historians, why have they historically occupied peripheral, marginal positions in our historical narratives?

Vice-Chancellor, Sir, today's lecture is in the field of Gender History. The fundamental purpose of this lecture is to demonstrate that gender is not merely an add-on to historical inquiry, but a critical, foundational analytical framework necessary for understanding the true complexities of Nigerian societies across time.

Understanding History: Beyond the Masculine Record

The word History is more than a chronological account of past events; it is a dynamic process of reconstructing human experiences. It is the collective memory of humanity and the foundation upon which societies understand themselves. History explains how nations emerged, how institutions evolved, how culture developed, and how individuals and communities responded to change.[2] History has been defined differently by historians depending on their philosophical orientation, methodology, and historical context. While some scholars view history as the study of the past, others such as William Sewell see it as an interpretation of human

[2] S. Maza, *Thinking About History,* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1-8.

experience as it unfolds and change over time.[3] The renowned British Historian Edward H. Carr famously posit, history as "an unending dialogue between the present and the past."[4] This emphasizes that historical facts do not speak for themselves; they are brought to life through the interpretive lens of the historian.

Taken together, Sewell's emphasis on historians' preoccupation with the temporalities of social life and Carr's emphasis on the historian's central role in mediating the dialogue between past and present point to an important pattern: history writing changes with the times. Every generation must revisit the past by asking new questions, challenging established interpretations, and recovering dimensions of human experience that earlier historians may have overlooked. Historical knowledge is therefore neither static nor detached from the social and intellectual contexts in which it is produced. As Aminu Yandaki observes in relation to African historiography, "history writing changes with the changing times." He notes that the dominance of colonialism produced historical writings that often-legitimised colonial rule, while the emergence of decolonisation created new intellectual conditions in which such interpretations could no longer be accepted uncritically.[5]

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[3] W. H. Sewell Jr., *Logis of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation,* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005, 1-21.

[4] E. H. Carr, *What is History?,* London: Macmillan. 1961.

[5] A. I. Yandaki, The State in Africa: A Critical Study in Historiography and Political Philosophy. Zaria: Gaskiya Corporation.2015.209.

This observation applies more broadly to the changing conception of the historical actor. The question of **who makes history and whose experiences deserve historical attention** has evolved significantly over time. Sarah Maza argued that, the oldest and most enduring model of historical writing, from Herodotus to modern political biographies, was largely written "from above." It placed kings, generals, colonial administrators, diplomats, and political elites at the centre of historical narratives, presenting them as the principal agents of historical change. Women occasionally appeared in these narratives, but usually as exceptional figures such as Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt, or Elizabeth I of England and Ireland.[6] Their inclusion, however, did not fundamentally challenge the male-centred structure of historical interpretation.

A significant historiographical shift occurred from the 1960s with the emergence of **"history from below."** This approach broadened the scope of historical inquiry by directing attention away from political elites and institutions towards ordinary people and their lived experiences. E. P. Thompson was particularly influential in this development. In *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), he demonstrated how economic, social, cultural, and emotional experiences of capitalism shaped the consciousness and political actions of ordinary people.[7] History was thus increasingly understood not simply as the story of rulers and institutions, but also as

[6] S. Maza, Thinking About History…..10-13.

[7] E.P. Thomson, The Making of the English Working Class. London: Penguin Books. 1963.

the history of workers, peasants, communities, and other groups whose experiences had previously received limited attention.

This historiographical transformation coincided with, and was reinforced by, the processes of decolonisation and national independence that swept across Africa and Asia. Colonised peoples increasingly asserted themselves not merely as subjects of history but as **historical agents capable of shaping their own political, social, and cultural destinies**.[8] In the African context, this development encouraged historians to question colonial interpretations and to recover African voices, experiences, institutions, and forms of agency that had been marginalised or distorted in colonial scholarship.

The expansion of historical inquiry continued from the 1970s with the rise of second-wave feminism. Unlike the first wave of feminism, which primarily sought women's suffrage and legal equality, second-wave feminism addressed broader questions of social, political, economic, and cultural inequality. This movement stimulated renewed scholarly interest in recovering women's experiences and provided innovative theoretical frameworks for analysing historical processes through the lens of gender. Feminist scholarship therefore, played an important role in transforming historical methodology by demonstrating that gender-aware historiography entails far

[8] A. I. Yandaki, The State in Africa, 23-27.

more than what some historians have described as the "add women and stir" approach.[9]

Joan Kelly was particularly influential in arguing that women should not simply be inserted into existing historical narratives as additional subjects. Rather, taking women seriously as historical actors required historians to reconsider the categories, chronology, structures, and interpretations through which the past itself was understood.[10] Women's history therefore represented more than the recovery of forgotten women; it constituted a fundamental challenge to the assumptions underlying conventional historical scholarship.

By the 1990s, these developments increasingly gave rise to **gender history**, which expanded the analytical framework beyond the study of women alone. Gender history examines the ways in which societies construct and assign meanings to femininity and masculinity, and how these constructions shape relationships of power, authority, identity, labour, and social organisation. It consequently asks not only what women did in the past, but also how ideas about being a woman or a man influenced historical experiences and institutions.

It is within this historiographical trajectory from history "from above," through history from below and women's history, to gender history that I locate my own scholarly engagement. My concern is not merely to add women to

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[9] A. B., *A Primer for Teaching World History,* 43-48.

[10] See J. Kelly, Women, History and Theory: Essays of Joan Kelly. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.1984.

established historical narratives, but to demonstrate how the study of gender can transform our understanding of historical processes themselves**.** We turn to the concept of gender history in the next section of this lecture.

Gender History: Concept and Evolution

Gender history is founded on the premise that the meanings attached to being male or female are socially and historically constructed and therefore subject to change across time and space. Rather than treating masculinity and femininity as fixed or biologically determined categories, gender historians examine how societies have defined and redefined the identities, roles, relationships, and expectations associated with women and men in different historical contexts.[11] Consequently, gender history explores the historical processes through which sexualities and gender differences are created, maintained, contested, and transformed.

Central to gender history is the analysis of the relationships between women and men, as well as the interactions among women and among men as gendered social actors. Gender historians investigate how these relationships have evolved within particular societies and historical periods. They also question and interrogate, as Antoinette Burton puts it, "the historical experiences of women and the structural forces that have produced gender and sexual difference as matters of life and death,

[11] O. R. Sonya, *What is Gender History?*, Cambridge: Polity Press. 2010, 3.

of war and peace, of *heimat* and exile."[12] By doing so, gender history demonstrates that gender is not merely a personal identity but also an important analytical category for understanding historical change.

In one of the most theoretically nuanced articulations of gender as a category of historical analysis, the renowned historian Joan W. Scott demonstrates how gender transcends the mere identification of differences between men and women to constitute a critical framework for understanding the organisation and exercise of power in society.[13] Gender encompasses the cultural interpretations, behavioural expectations, and social roles that societies assign to individuals on the basis of their sex.[14] These roles and identities vary considerably across cultures and historical periods. The diverse forms that sexuality has taken across time and space, for example, reflect the changing nature of social values rather than fixed biological realities.

Bouka observed that, the construction of gender through binary distinctions frequently associates masculinity with qualities such as strength, rationality, and aggression, while femininity is linked with weakness, irrationality, and victimhood. Such assumptions have contributed to the restriction of women largely to private, familial, and

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[12] A. Burton, *A Primer for Teaching World History: Ten Design Principles,* Durham: Duke University Press, 2012, 37.

[13] W. Scott, Gender: A Useful Category of Analysis. American Historical Review.91 (5): 1053-1075.

[14] J. W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Analysis," 5.

domestic spaces. These spheres are often treated as separate from the public domain and, consequently, are perceived as falling outside the central responsibilities and concerns of the state.[15] Although gender encompasses both men and women, the field of gender history has been overwhelmingly women-centred, reflecting a sustained effort to redress the long-standing neglect of women as historical actors. Indeed, the distinction between sex and gender emerged largely through feminist scholarship. Feminist historians deployed the concept of gender to challenge biological determinism, demonstrating that many differences long regarded as natural are, in reality, socially and culturally constructed. While sex refers to biological characteristics, gender draws attention to the historically contingent ways in which societies define and assign meanings to masculinity and femininity.[16] This conceptual distinction has become fundamental to historical inquiry because it enables historians to investigate how power, authority, and social relations are shaped through gendered norms and practices.[17] Gender encompasses the cultural interpretations, behavioural expectations, and social roles that societies assign to

[15] Y. Bouka, "Women, Colonial Resistance, and Decolonization: Challenging African Histories" in O. Yacob-Haliso and T. Falola (eds) The Palgrave Handbook of African Women's Studies. Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan. 2021.P.1295.

[16] J. W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Analysis," 10.

[17] A. B. Bawa, "Feminism and Political Activism in Northern Nigeria: A Case Study of Gambo Sawaba," In Aquah, L.J and Falola, T. (eds.) *Perspectives on the Religious Landscape in Africa*. Durham: Carolina Academic Press. 2020.

individuals on the basis of their sex.[18] These roles and identities vary considerably across cultures and historical periods. The diverse forms that sexuality has taken across time and space, for example, reflect the changing nature of social values rather than fixed biological realities.

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[18] J. W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Analysis," 5.

[19] J. W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Analysis," 10.

[20] A. B. Bawa, "Feminism and Political Activism in Northern Nigeria: A Case Study of Gambo Sawaba," In L. J. Aquah and T. Falola (eds.) *Perspectives on the Religious Landscape in Africa*. Durham: Carolina Academic Press. 2020.

Unveiling the Hidden Narratives: My Intellectual journey into Gender History

Vice-Chancellor, Sir, distinguished ladies and gentlemen, my journey into gender history began not with a conscious intention to rethink or rewrite Nigerian historiography, but with a curiosity about historical actors who existed at the margins of historical narratives. My earliest research explored the history of *bori*, a pre-Islamic Hausa religious institution that survived despite being increasingly stigmatized and marginalized in our predominantly Muslim society.[21] It did not take long for me to realize that *bori* was sustained largely by women. They were the custodians of its rituals, the transmitters of its knowledge, and the generations through whom the institution endured. That early discovery became a defining moment in my scholarly career. It shifted my interest from the broader question of marginalized historical actors to the more fundamental realization that taking women seriously as historical subjects could profoundly reshape our understanding of the past.

Throughout my academic career, this foundational question – Where are the women, and what does recovering them change? – has guided my scholarship. It has led me into diverse fields of inquiry spanning the precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial periods, each demanding distinct sets of sources, methods, and

[21] A. B. Bawa, "Bori Practice: Cultural Domination of Hausa Women in Northern Nigeria," *Sokoto Journal of History,* 6&7, 11-28.

historiographical approaches. While my various academic works address different historical contexts and themes, they are united by a common concern: demonstrating how placing women at the centre of historical analysis reveals dimensions of Nigerian history that have long remained hidden.

For the remainder of this lecture, Mr. Vice Chancellor, I will present these themes not as a single continuous narrative, but as a series of scholarly interventions that together illustrate the explanatory power of gender history. The major themes include:

1. Historiographical analyses of the neglect of women in Nigerian history.
2. Women in pre-Islamic religious institutions: the case of *bori*.
3. Women and Islam in Nigeria: the Sokoto Caliphate.
4. Women in colonial and anti-colonial history.
5. Informal structures of power: Nigerian First Ladies.
6. Women in contemporary insecurity and conflict.

We begin with the most conceptual of these themes: the historiographical omission of women from Nigerian historical research and writing.

The Neglect of Women in Nigerian Historiography

Historiography refers to both the study of the methodology of historians and the development of history as a discipline, and also, of an embodiment of historical works on a particular aspect of the discipline. Nigerian historiography has evolved through distinct intellectual

traditions, each reflecting prevailing political, social, and ideological contexts.

First, colonial historians denied Africa a history altogether, viewing the continent through a racist, Eurocentric lens that saw only static tribes bereft of any civilization. Eurocentric writers such as G. W. Hegel, Reginald Coupland, A. P. Newton and Hugh Trevor-Roper championed this cause. They insisted that even if there were events of a historical nature, such a history was unknown, since African societies for most part, were non literate (in western terms) and as such left no records that historians could study.[22] Second, in reaction to these Eurocentric assumptions, nationalist historians embarked on a systematic recovery of Africa's past through the study of oral traditions and other alternative historical sources such as archaeology and historical linguistics. The pioneering works, produced at the Ibadan School of History, include Kenneth O. Dike's *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta*, J. F. Ade Ajayi and R. S. Smith's *Yoruba Warfare in the Nineteenth Century*, and Obaro Ikime's *Merchant Prince of the Niger Delta: The Rise and Fall of Nana Olomu*.[23] Together, these works demonstrated that

[22] F. Afolayan, "African Historiography" in K. Shillington (ed) *Encyclopedia of African History,* Vol. 2. New York: Fitzrey Dearborn, 2005, 626.

[23] K.O. Dike, *Trade and Politics in Niger Delta,1830-1885: An Introduction to the Economic and Political History of Nigeria*, London: Oxford University Press, 1956. J.F. Ade Ajayi and Robert Smith, *Yoruba Warfare in the Nineteenth Century,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964. Obaro Ikime, *Merchant Prince of the Niger Delta: The Rise and Fall of Nana Olumo,* New York: Africana Publishing Corporation, 1969.

precolonial Nigeria possessed sophisticated political institutions, dynamic economic systems, and vibrant diplomatic traditions. As Toyin Falola and Saheed Aderinto observe, these studies celebrated towering historical figures such as Jaja of Opobo, Shaykh Usman dan Fodio of Sokoto Caliphate, and Idris Alooma of Kanem-Borno.[24] But despite their important contributions, nationalist historiography, like its colonial predecessor, left women largely invisible.

This omission has created what historians describe as the problem of exclusion, whereby the experiences and contributions of particular groups remain underrepresented or completely omitted from mainstream historical narratives.[25]. Iris and Frances note that "finding women in the histories of the non-western requires persistence due to the silence or obliqueness of traditional historical sources such as documents written by historical actors themselves. The role of women in agriculture, health, crafts religion has often been regarded as not worthy of documentation".[26] Corroborating this views, June Purvis laments that:

> Women, like men, have been actors in history, and yet their achievements and struggles have generally been neglected

[24] T. Falola and S. Aderinto, *Nigeria, Nationalism and Writing History*. USA: University of Rochester Press.2010.235.

[25]T. Falola and S. Aderinto, *Nigeria, Nationalism and Writing History,* 82.

[26] B. Iris and W. Francis*, Women in Sub-Saharan Africa: Restoring Women to History*, Indiana University Press, USA.1999.

> by mainstream historians who concentrate upon male subjects, male activities and male experiences. Undoubtedly many women scholars and intellectuals in the past were aware of this bias.[27]

In "Historiography of Hausa Women in Northern Nigeria in the Twentieth Century"[28] constitutes a direct intervention in the problems of systematic exclusion of women from historical narratives. While earlier scholarship acknowledged the scarcity of women in historical records, this study moves beyond observation to interrogate the epistemological and methodological foundations that produced such silences. It argues that the invisibility of Hausa women in historical writing was neither accidental nor evidence of their historical insignificance; rather, it was the consequence of the intellectual assumptions, ideological orientations, and documentary practices of those who have written Northern Nigerian history.

Through a critical analysis of colonial records, travelers' accounts, oral traditions, biographies, and later gender scholarship, it reveals that Hausa women exercised authority as rulers, queen mothers, palace administrators,

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[27] J. Purvis, "Using Primary Sources When Researching Women's History from a Feminist Perspectives". Women's History Review, 1(2): 273-306. 2006.

[28] A. B. Bawa, "A Historiography of Hausa Women in Northern Nigeria in the 20th Century," In A. B. Bawa & Y. Abubakar (eds) *Women and History in Northern Nigeria*. Makurdi: Aboki Publishers.2020.

traders, textile producers, educators, and Islamic scholars. In pre-colonial Bornu, especially among the Bolewa (Kanuri), women occupied the highly respected offices of *Magira* (Mai's mother), *Magara* (Mai's senior sister) and *Gumsu* (Mai's first wife). The extent of *Magira's* power was demonstrated in the imprisonment of Mai Idris Alooma in 1572.[29] Similarly, in Hausa Land female political figures such as Queen Argoje, Bakwa Turuku and the warrior Queen Amina of Zazzau (Zaria) emerged. Queen Yargoje (Argoje) is reputed to have been one of the few women to ascend to rulership in Hausa land before the 19th century. Oral accounts portray her as a ruler who held full political authority, presiding over governance, administering justice, and defending her realm against external threats. She was the daughter of *Dakka*, the first king of Zamfara kingdom. She reigned between the years 1310 – 1350.[30] While there are a lot of contestations on the rulership of Amina as a Queen there is no such argument about *Yargoje*. The name of *Yargoje* has appeared in the kings list of Zamfara Kingdom when it was at Dutsi. The kinglist starts with the names of the pre-dynastic figures that were said to have been rulers at Dutsi before the dynasty moved to Birnin

[29] M. Crowther, *The Story of Nigeria*, Faber and Faber, London, 1976, 29

[30] A. B. Bawa, "History and Gender: A Cursory Look at the Forgotten Female Heroines in the Former Zamfara and Gobir Kingdoms," Paper Presented at the 60th Congress of Historical Society of Nigeria held at the Management Sciences Auditorium, University of Abuja, Main Campus on 11th-14th October 2015.

Zamfara. These are: Dakka, Jatau, Jamir Dakkai, Kokai-kokai, Dudufani and Queen Yargoje (Argoje).[31]

Figure 1: Queen Yargoje Lamp

The figure shows a historical Lamp traditionally associated with Queen Yargoje and Preserved as part of the material heritage of Zamfara. According to the Museum the Lamp is believed to date around 1350 A.D. Oral sources reveal that the Queen used it during her council meeting at night. **Source**: Waziru Junaidu History and Culture Bureau. Sokoto. 2016.

Queen Amina was a warrior queen who built a high wall around Zaria in order to protect the city from invasion.[32] She also extended the boundaries of Zazzau kingdom

[31] See K. Krieger, *Geschichte Von Zamfara: Sokoto-Provinz Nord Nigeria,* Berlin: Dietrich Relmer Verlag, 1950, 26.

[32] S. Abubakar, "Queen Amina of Zaria", In B. Awe (ed), *Nigeria Women in Historical Perspectives*, Ibadan: Sonkerel Bookcraft, 1992, 15.

beyond Bauchi and up to some parts of Zamfara and Kebbi kingdoms. Her exploits are still widely recounted in Hausa land. The *Abuja chronicle* and *infaqul Maysur* of Sultan Muhammadu Bello both describe her as a daughter of the ruling house.[33]

Table 1: Women Traditional Rulers in Pre-colonial Nigeria

S/N	NAME	TOWN	STATE	TITLE	DATE
1.	Luwo Gbadiaya	Ife	Osun	Ooni of ife	Pre-colonial
2.	Iyayun	Oyo	Oyo	Alaafin	Pre-colonial
3.	Orompoto	Oyo	Oyo	Alaafin	Pre-colonial
4.	Jomijomi	Oyo	Oyo	Alaafin	Pre-colonial
5.	Jepojepo	Oyo	Oyo	Alaafin	Pre-colonial
6.	Nnenne Mgbokwu	Aro	Abia	Ezenwanyi	Pre-colonial
7.	Daura	Daura	Katsina	Queen	Pre-colonial
8.	Bakwa Turuku	Zaria	Kaduna	Queen	Pre-colonial
9.	Amina	Zaria	Kaduna	Queen	Pre-colonial
10.	Knafono	Daura	Katsina	Queen	Pre-colonial
11.	Gulfano	Daura	Katsina	Queen	Pre-colonial
12.	Yakwano	Daura	Katsina	Queen	Pre-colonial
13.	Walsam	Daura	Katsina	Queen	Pre-colonial
14.	Cadar	Daura	Katsina	Queen	Pre-colonial
15.	Agagri	Daura	Katsina	Queen	Pre-colonial
16.	Yargoje	Dutse	Zamfara	Queen	Pre-colonial
17.	Queen kambasa	Bonny	River	Queen	Pre-colonial

Source: copied and modified from Ayabam, T. (2013). Women in Politics and Decision-making in Nigeria's challenges and prospects. *European Journal of Social Sciences.* 2(8): 47-58.

[33] S. Abubakar, "Queen Amina of Zaria", 10.

The foregoing discussion demonstrates that precolonial Nigeria was not an exclusively male political arena. Across different societies, women exercised substantial political, economic, and diplomatic authority, often occupying positions as influential as those held by men. And this was not limited to influential female figures like Queen Yargoje or Quen Amina. Heidi Nast, for example, has shown that royal concubines in Kano were far more than mere members of the royal household. As women captured from different territories, they served as vital political intermediaries, forging and sustaining economic, social, and diplomatic ties between the Kano kingdom and neighbouring states.[34] Their influence reveals that women, across social strata, were integral to statecraft, not peripheral to it.

The consolidation of British rule at the beginning of the twentieth century fundamentally disrupted these arrangements. Through the policy of indirect rule, colonial administrators did not simply adapt indigenous institutions; they selectively appropriated and reconfigured them, recognizing predominantly male authorities as the sole legitimate intermediaries between the colonial state and local communities. In the process, they dismantled more flexible and inclusive systems of governance in which women had exercised meaningful authority and replaced them with a bureaucratic order that concentrated formal political power in male hands. The effect was not

[34] Heidi J. Nast, *Concubines and Power: Five Hundred Years in a Northern Nigeria Palace*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Pres. 2005.

merely to preserve patriarchy but to deepen and institutionalize it. Colonial rule thus marked a decisive rupture: rather than inheriting pre-existing gender hierarchies, it reconstructed them, narrowing women's access to political power and embedding male dominance within the structures of the modern Nigerian state.[35] Ntiwunka and Nwaodike, observed that colonial rule did not merely regulate African societies in areas such as knowledge, culture, artistic expression, and economic activities; it also had profound implications for relations between men and women. Colonial structures reinforced patriarchal practices and contributed to significant changes in the ways gender identities and roles were constructed across Africa.[36]

The economic transformation accompanying colonial rule further intensified women's marginalization. Colonial capitalism reoriented the Nigerian economy towards the production and export of cash crops and the expansion of European commercial interests. This restructuring privileged male participation in the emerging colonial economy while undermining the economic sectors traditionally dominated by women.

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[35] A. B. Bawa, "Women in the Corridors of Power: A History of Nigeria's First Ladies, 1966-2010," PhD Thesis, Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto, 2014.

[36] G.U. Ntiwunka and C.A. Nwaodike, Women and Colonialism in West Africa in O. Yacob-Haliso and T. Falola (eds) The Palgrave Handbook of African Women's Studies. Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan. 2021.p.1170.

A considerable body of scholarship indicates that several developments associated with colonial transformation contributed to the deterioration of women's economic position in Nigeria. Taxation, the expansion of capitalist relations, the reinforcement of patriarchal structures, industrialisation, and the introduction of formal education collectively influenced the processes that eventually contributed to the relatively disadvantaged economic position occupied by many Nigerian women in contemporary society.[37]

In *Women Academics and Historiography in Nigerian Universities*,[38] the work examined how female Nigerian historians from the 1970s onward challenged the masculine tradition of silencing women in conventional historical scholarship. Prominent among these female academics are Nina Mba, Bolanle Awe and LaRay Denzer. Their contribution extended far beyond documenting women's activities; they challenged the epistemological assumptions that had defined what counted as historical knowledge. They demonstrated that the absence of women from historical narratives was not evidence of women's absence from history, but rather a reflection of

[37] T. Falola, "Writing Nigerian Women in the Economy, Education, and Literature" 1 in O. Yacob-Haliso and T. Falola (eds) The Palgrave Handbook of African Women's Studies. Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan. 2021.P.1235.

[38] A. B. Bawa, "Women Academics and Historiography in Nigerian Universities," In O. Yacob-Haliso, N. Nwogwugwu and G. Ntiwunka (eds.) *African Indigenous Knowledge in Postcolonial World: Essay in Honour of Toyin Falola,* Routledge, 2021.

historians' methodological choices and patriarchal interpretations of the past. Their scholarship reclaimed women by recovering historical actors who had been erased from mainstream narratives and by broadening the scope of historical inquiry. They reconstructed the lives of women whose contributions had remained hidden beneath male-centred historical narratives. In doing so, they established that women were not merely companions of great men but independent historical actors.

Awe, identifies the *Iyalode* as one of the most powerful institutions in precolonial Yoruba society. In doing so, she not only demonstrates the central role women played in Yoruba political life but also restores their visibility within Nigerian historiography.[39] In 'Saviours of Their Societies," Awe broadens this intervention by examining the diverse roles and experiences of women across Nigerian society.[40] She highlights, among others, the remarkable contributions of Madam Tinubu of Abeokuta and Iyalode Efunsetan Aniwura of Ibadan, showing how they deployed their economic resources, social influence, and political authority to shape the course of warfare and public affairs in their respective towns.[41]

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[39] B. Awe, "The Institution of the Iyalode Within the Traditional Yoruba Political System," Paper Presented at the Seventeenth Annual Meeting of the African Studies Association, Chicago, October 30-November 2, 1974.

[40] B. Awe, "Savious of Their Societies," In Awe Bolanle, (ed.) *Nigerian Women in Historical Perspective*. Ibadan: Sankore Publishers/Bookcraft, 1992.

[41] Falola and Aderinto, Nigeria, Nationalism……155

Nina Mba[42] in her work, demonstrates that colonialism transformed rather than created women's political activism. Before colonial rule, women exercised political influence through indigenous institutions such as market associations, women's councils and traditional leadership structures. Colonial administration weakened many of these institutions by replacing them with male-dominated administrative systems, thereby reducing women's formal political authority. L. Denzer likewise challenged the male-centred orientation of Nigerian historiography. She argues that the history of the Yoruba had traditionally been written from a predominantly male perspective, concentrating on kings, chiefs, wars, diplomacy and state formation while paying little attention to women's contributions. She observes that women appeared only occasionally in historical narratives, usually as wives or relatives of prominent men, despite abundant evidence of their political, economic and religious significance. In *Yoruba Women: A Historiographical Study* (1994), Denzer drew on oral traditions to reconstruct women's past, identifying six female rulers in the succession list of Ilesa. In doing so, she not only restored influential Yoruba women to the historical record but also demonstrated the methodological value of oral traditions for recovering marginalized historical actors.[43]

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[42] N. E. Mba, *Nigerian Women Mobilized: Women's Political Activity in Southern Nigeria, 1900-1965*. Berkeley: University of California, 1982.

[43] L. Denzer, "Yoruba Women: A Historiographical Study," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 27 (1): 1-39.1994.

The interventions of these scholars (Awe, Mba and Denzer) marked a watershed in Nigerian historiography. They shifted historical inquiry from an almost exclusive focus on male political actors to a broader social history in which women emerged as active makers of history rather than passive observers of it. But this early phase of women's history in Nigeria attracted criticism from within feminist scholarship itself. Gerda Lerner argued that many historians merely produced what she termed "compensatory history", the recovery of exceptional women omitted from conventional narratives. Such an approach, she agrees, raises important questions like "Who are the women missing from history? Who are the women of achievement and what did they achieve?" However, these questions rarely lead to inquiries that say anything substantial about the lives of ordinary women or the broader significance of women's activities in shaping society. Recovering a handful of remarkable women, she argues, is not the same as explaining how gender structures historical experience.[44]

Despite these criticisms, early scholarship in women's history fundamentally transformed historical scholarship in Nigeria. It opened new fields of inquiry, uncovered previously neglected sources, generated fresh historiographical debates, and established the study of women as an indispensable component of historical analysis. In time, this scholarship evolved into the broader

[44] G. Lerner, "Placing Women in History: A 1975 Perspectives" In B.A. Carroll (ed.) *Liberating Women's History*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.1984.

field of gender history, shifting attention from recovering women alone to examining how gender itself has shaped historical processes, institutions, and relations of power.

Women in Pre-Islamic Religious Institutions: The Case of Bori

Bori is a complex indigenous religious, therapeutic, and socio-cultural institution historically associated with Hausa societies in Northern Nigeria and neighbouring parts of the Central Sudan. Although it has frequently been described in early colonial and anthropological literature as a "spirit-possession cult," [45]such a narrow categorisation does not sufficiently capture its multiple meanings and social functions. Bori encompasses a system of belief concerning the existence and activities of spirits (*iskoki*), ritual practices through which relationships with these spirits are negotiated, and networks of practitioners who possess specialised knowledge of healing, music, spirit identification, and ceremonial performance. It should therefore be understood not simply as an act of spirit possession, but as an indigenous system of knowledge and social practice through which communities interpreted illness, misfortune, emotional distress, and disturbances in the relationship between the human and spiritual worlds.

A study on the Gobirawa women of Sabon Birni area in Sokoto State demonstrates that *Bori* was far more than a religious institution; it also served as an important arena of

[45] F. E. Besmer, "Initiation into the 'Bori' Cult: A Case Study in Ningi Town." *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 47, no. 1 (1977): 1–13.

female authority. At its apex stood the *Inna*, a royal priestess drawn from the ruling family who occupied one of the highest offices in the Gobir Kingdom. Beyond her ritual responsibilities, the *Inna* supervised women throughout the kingdom, dispensed healing and divination, served as regent in the king's absence, and, on occasions, even commanded military forces in battle. *Bori* therefore provided women with a recognized institutional framework through which they exercised religious, political, and military authority.[46]

This finding is consistent with the observations of Callaway and Creevey, who note that women of royal families were closely associated with *Bori*, which functioned as a state religion under the leadership of elite women.[47] Likewise, Falola and Amponsah argue that in many precolonial African societies, women occupied positions of considerable prestige and authority, serving not only as agricultural producers and economic actors but also as priestesses, spiritual leaders, warriors, and custodians of political power.[48]

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[46] A. B. Bawa and U.A. Yandaki, Spirituality, Power and Feminism: Historical Narratives of Bori Practice among Women in Sabon Birni District of Sokoto State. AFRREV: An International Journal of Arts and Humanities (IJAH), 8(1):46-55.2019.

[47] B. J. Callaway and L. Creevey, The Heritage of Islam: Women, Religion, and Politics in West Africa. Boulder: Reinner Publishers. 1994.

[48] T. Falola and N. A. Amponsah, *Women's Roles in Sub- Saharan Africa*. USA: Greenwood. 2013.

The study also demonstrates the remarkable resilience of women's institutions in the face of profound historical change. The spread of Islam, the Sokoto Jihad of 1804, and later colonial rule progressively restricted the public practice of *Bori*, yet none succeeded in eliminating it. Colonial officials often viewed Bori through the prejudices of European administrative and missionary discourse, describing spirit possession, trance, ritual performance, and healing as manifestations of superstition, paganism, or social disorder. The increasing regulation of public gatherings, the expansion of colonial administrative authority, and the gradual introduction of Western biomedical practices reduced the public spaces within which Bori practitioners could openly operate. At the same time, reformist Islamic movements, especially the rise of the Salafi-inclined Izalah, challenged spirit possession and associated ritual practices. But *Bori* endured because it fulfilled social needs that neither the colonial state nor emerging religious and medical institutions could adequately replace. It continued to provide an indigenous framework for understanding and responding to illness, infertility, emotional distress, reproductive challenges, and other forms of personal and communal crisis.

My investigation of women's religious authority did not end with *Bori*. Having established that women occupied central positions within indigenous religious institutions, I became interested in a broader historical question: Did the spread of Islam diminish women's agency, or did women adapt to changing religious landscapes and continue to

exercise influence through new forms of religious authority and participation? It is to that question that I now turn.

Women and Islam in Nigeria: The Sokoto Caliphate

My study "Engendering Islamic Civilization in West Africa," situates the contributions of Nigerian women to Islamic learning and scholarship within the wider intellectual landscape of West Africa, including Islamic centres across Timbuktu, Jenne, Walata, Senegal, Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso. The work demonstrates that women's participation in Islamic scholarship transcended political boundaries and formed part of an interconnected tradition linking West Africa to the broader Muslim world. In doing so, the study enriches our understanding of trans-Saharan intellectual networks by showing that Islamic civilization in the region was shaped through the combined efforts of both men and women.[49]

Fatima al-Fihri is celebrated for founding al-Qarawiyyin in Fez, one of the oldest and most influential centres of Islamic learning in the Muslim world. In Senegal, Mame Asta Waala earned distinction as a scholar of Maliki jurisprudence and directed a *madrasa* attended by both male and female students. Her daughter, Mame Diarra Busso, taught alongside her and supervised the memorisation of the Qur'an by numerous pupils,

[49] A. B. Bawa, Engendering Islamic Civilization in West Africa. Proceedings of the International Conference on Islamic History and Civilization in West Africa, Organised by Organisation of Cooperation Research Centre for Islamic Art and Culture (IRCICA) : Istanbul. 2020.

demonstrating the continuity of female scholarship across generations.

In Northern Nigeria, Nana Asma'u, daughter of Shaykh Usman dan Fodio, has rightly emerged as the most celebrated symbol of women's intellectual achievement in the Sokoto Caliphate. Behind and alongside her stood a much broader community of learned women whose contributions have remained largely overlooked. Among them was Hadiza bint Uthman dan Fodio, whose scholarly engagements reportedly included translating the *Mukhtasar* of Khalil. Equally significant was Maryam bint Uthman dan Fodio, popularly known as *Uwar Daje*. Beyond composing poetry, Maryam responded to questions of political and religious significance, including debates concerning the office of the Imam, migration, and expectations surrounding the Mahdi. Following the death of Nana Asma'u, she assumed leadership of both her school and the *'Yan Taru* educational movement, ensuring the continuity of one of the Caliphate's most important institutions of female learning.

Moreover, this tradition was not confined to the Sokoto ruling family. Maimunatu bint Qadi Bazari of Katsina distinguished herself as a jurist, grammarian, and Sufi scholar. Amina, daughter of Muhammad Nakashiri, taught members of the Adamawa ruling house, and Goggo Zaituna became renowned as both a teacher and a composer of religious poetry in Fulfulde. Their careers demonstrate that women occupied respected positions

within the intellectual life of Muslim societies across Northern Nigeria.[50]

These examples show that female Islamic scholarship was neither exceptional nor confined to the household of Usman dan Fodio. Rather, it formed part of a wider intellectual tradition that stretched across Northern Nigeria and the Western and Central Sudan. Recovering these women not only expands our understanding of Islamic civilization in West Africa but also challenges the enduring assumption that its scholarly tradition was an exclusively male achievement.

Women in Colonial and Anti- Colonial History

From the earliest stages of colonial domination, African women played an important ideological and religious role in challenging colonial authority. They responded, at times through violent resistance, to policies associated with colonial administration, taxation, restrictions on trade, and government attempts to regulate prices. Their reactions demonstrate that women were active participants in resistance to colonial rule rather than passive victims of the colonial experience.[51] Historical accounts of women's anti-colonial protests in Nigeria have overwhelmingly centered on Southern Nigeria, most notably the Aba

[50] See H, Bobboyi, "Bornu, Wadai and Adamawa" In J. O. Hunwick and E.J. Bril (eds.) Arabic Literature of Africa: The Writings of Central Sudanic Africa. Vol.2. 1995.

[51] O. A. Adesina, "Women and Colonialism Across Africa" in O. Yacob-Haliso and T. Falola (eds) The Palgrave Handbook of African Women's Studies. Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan. 2021.

Women's Uprising of 1929 and Egba women protest in Southwest. In "Protest and Resistance: Women's Political Agency in Northern Nigeria,"[52] It challenges this geographical imbalance by documenting the rich, yet largely overlooked, history of female political agency.

The study documents women actively participating in the' mass anti-colonial emigration (*hijra*) led by Sultan Attahiru I to escape British rule, enduring extreme physical hardships, thirst, and casualties along the journey. Many mothers carried their infants securely on their backs while simultaneously transporting household belongings and food supplies, demonstrating remarkable resilience and commitment to the collective cause. There are accounts of some women who went into labour during the migration and were compelled to give birth under extremely difficult conditions along the route. Without access to medical assistance or adequate shelter, these women relied on traditional birth attendants and the support of fellow migrants before continuing the journey shortly after childbirth.

In addition, during the Satiru Revolt of 1906, women were strategically deployed to neighboring villages such as Danchadi, Tsomau and Dange disguised as snack sellers to spy on anti-Satiru forces, contributing directly to the tactical success of the raids. The research reveals that

[52] A. B. Bawa, "Protest and Resistance: Women's Political Agency in Northern Nigeria". In *Nigerian Women in Politics: Essays in Honour of Nina Emma Mba*, edited by Adebayo O. and Bolanle Awe. Ibadan: Ben and Nina Mba Foundation, 2022. See also A. S. Mohammed, *The Satiru Revolt of Peasants and Slaves in Sokoto Caliphate*. Lagos: Malthouse Limited.2024.

women were structurally integrated into the Satiru rebel battle formation, occupying the fourth line of defense. They acted as combatants, sustained the rebels by cooking for an estimated 10,000 people, and used motivational songs and drums (led by figures like Yarkundus) to mobilize men into battle.[53] These findings demonstrate that women were not peripheral supporters of anti-colonial struggles but indispensable actors in their planning, execution, and endurance.

Unlike the women of Satiru, whose opposition to colonial rule assumed the form of armed resistance, Gambo Sawaba adopted political mobilization, public advocacy and grassroots organization as instruments of struggle. As a leading member of the Northern Elements Progressive Union (NEPU), she challenged both British colonial domination and the conservative political structures that denied Northern women political participation. She campaigned tirelessly for universal adult suffrage, women's education, freedom of association, and political representation at a time when colonial policies and entrenched patriarchal norms combined to restrict women's participation in politics[54].

[53] See A. S. Mohammad, The Satiru Revolt of Peasants and Slaves in Sokoto Caliphate. Lagos: Malthouse Press Limited. 2024.

[54] A. B. Bawa, Feminism and Political Activism in Northern Nigeria: A Case Study of Gambo Sawaba" In L.J.Acquah and T.Falola (eds) Perspectives on the Religious Landscape in Africa. Durhan: Carolina Academic Press.2020.

Her repeated arrests, imprisonment, public humiliation and physical assaults reveal the enormous personal sacrifices required to sustain political activism under colonial rule. Rather than silencing her, these experiences strengthened her determination and transformed her into one of the most resilient voices for women's emancipation in Northern Nigeria. The research repositions Gambo Sawaba not merely as a women's rights advocate but as a nationalist whose struggle formed part of the wider anti-colonial movement in Nigeria. The study establishes that the campaign for female suffrage in Northern Nigeria was inseparable from the broader struggle for democratic governance, social justice and national independence. By linking her activism with the wider nationalist movement and her collaboration with figures such as Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, the research demonstrates that Northern Nigeria women were active architects of Nigeria's independence rather than passive beneficiaries of constitutional reforms.

The Informal Structures of Power: Nigeria First Ladies

Vice Chancellor, Sir, from recovering women's agency in indigenous religion, to documenting their roles in Islamic intellectual history, and subsequently uncovering their leadership in anti-colonial resistance, my scholarship naturally progressed to examining women's participation in governance in post-colonial Nigeria. The office of the First Lady has no provision in the Nigerian constitution, yet it has become one of the most influential institutions shaping governance, public policy, and social development

in contemporary Nigeria. This development has created a category of women whose qualification for the position was primarily derived from their marital relationship with men who occupied positions of political authority.[55] Abigail Adams the wife of US President John Adams (1797-1801) wrote to her husband in her famous letter "remember the ladies";

> I long to hear that you have Declared Independence and by the way in the new code of laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make. I desire you remember the ladies, and be more generous and favourable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the Husbands. Remember all men would be tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention is not paid to ladies, we are determined to foment a rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice, or Representation.[56]

Abigail's progressive ideas however, inspired many first ladies, and the suffragists who, in Britain and US worked to get the right for women to share on equal terms with

[55] Ramtohul, Women, Gender, and Politics…..p.305

[56] F.A. Carl, The Saga of President's Wives and their Power, 1789-1961.P. 685.

men the political privileges afforded by representative government and, more particularly to vote in political elections in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The office of the First Lady has no provision in the constitution of Nigeria, yet it has become one of the most influential institutions shaping governance, public policy, and social development in contemporary Nigeria. This contradiction between constitutional invisibility and political relevance motivated my sustained investigation into the evolution, activities, and implications of first ladyship in Nigeria.

First Ladies have constituted an informal institution of governance that has operated alongside formal state structures since the institutionalisation of the office by Mrs. Maryam Babangida in 1987.[57] Through successive administrations, First Ladies have exercised considerable influence in policy advocacy, social mobilisation, humanitarian intervention, women's empowerment, healthcare, education, peacebuilding, and poverty reduction. By placing these activities within their proper historical context, I have demonstrated that governance in Nigeria extends beyond constitutionally recognised institutions to include informal centres of political influence that significantly shape national development. The study challenged the perception that the First Lady

[57] A. B. Bawa. Women in the Corridors of Power: A History of Nigeria's First Ladies in Governance, 1966-2010. Doctoral Thesis, Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto. 2014. See A.B.Bawa, Women in the Corridors of Power: Nigerian First Ladies in Governance.

phenomenon is merely a modern political development by tracing its historical antecedents to pre-colonial African systems where royal women, queen mothers, female chiefs, and regents exercised recognised political authority. In doing so, the study established a historical continuity between indigenous female leadership and the contemporary political influence of First Ladies across Africa.

A major contribution of my research has been the development of a historical framework for understanding the emergence and institutionalisation of first ladyship in Nigeria. Rather than examining individual First Ladies in isolation, I have traced the historical evolution of the institution from the Better Life Programme for Rural Women introduced by Maryam Babangida[58], through the Family Support Programme and Family Economic Advancement Programme of Maryam Abacha, the legal advocacy initiatives of Justice Fati Abubakar's WRAPA, the Child Care Trust of Stella Obasanjo, and the Women and Youth Empowerment Foundation of Turai Yar'Adua,

[58] A. B. Bawa, "Maryam Babangida and Women Empowerment Programmes in Nigeria, 1987-1993," *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, 28:134-144.

Table 2: List of Past Chairpersons of the Better Life Programme in the States, 1987-1991

S/N	State	Chairpersons	Military Governors	Year
1	FCT	Mrs. Halima Hamza	AVM Hamza Abdullahi	1987-1989
		Mrs. Fatima G. Nasko	Major Gen. Gado Nasko	1989-1991
2	Anambra	Mrs. Ngozi Omeruah	GP. Capt. S.E.Emerua	1987-1988
		Mrs. May Akonobi	Col. Bob Akonobi	1988-1990
		Mrs. Emelda Eze	Lt. Col. Herbert Eze	1990-1991
3	Akwa-Ibom	Mrs. Jackie Ogbeha	Col. Tunde Ogbeha	1987-1988
		Mrs. Patience Abbe	Col.Godwin Abbe	1988-1990
		Mrs. Duak Nkanga	Wing Commd. Idongesit Nkanga	1990-1991
4	Bauchi	Mrs. Elizabeth I. Garuba	Lt. Col. Chris A. Garuba	1987-1988
		Mrs. Alice Madaki	Col. Joshua Madaki	1988-1990
		Mrs. Fatima Abu Ali	Col. Abu Ali	1990-1991
5	Bendel	Mrs. Elizabeth Inienger	Col. John Inieger	1987-1988
		Mrs. Jackie Ogbeha	Col. Tunde Ogbeha	1988-1990
		Mrs. Perpetua Yeri	Col. John Yeri	1990-1991
6	Benue	Mrs. Ijeoma Bakut	Lt.Col. Ishaya Bakut	Sept-Dec 1987
		Mrs. Fatima Idris Garba	Col. Idris Garba	1987-1988
		Mrs. Pauline Makka	Lt.Col. Fidelis Makka	1988-1991
7	Borno	Mrs. Hadiza Aminu	Major Abdulmumini Aminu	1987-1988
		Mrs. Rabiu Mohammed	Col. Abdullahi Mohammed	1988-1989

		Mrs. Zainab Maina Mrs. Zainab Marwa	Col. Mohammed Maina Col. Mohammed B.Marwa	1989-1990 1990-1991
8	Cross River	Mrs. Daba Princewill Mrs. Rose Dan	Navy Capt.Ibim Princewill Col. Dan Archibong	1987-1989 1989-1991
9	Gongola	Mrs. Talatu Jang Mrs.Medina Mohammed Mrs. Bilikisu A. Salihu	GP. Capt. David J.Jang GP. Isa Mohammed GP. Capt. Abubakar Salihu	1987-1989 1989-1990 1990-1991
10	Imo	Mrs. Frances Ikwechegh Mrs. Rosemary Madueke	Lt.Commd.Amadi ikwechegh Navt. Capt. Allison Madueke	1987-1990 1990-1991
11	Kaduna	Mrs. Halima A. Umar Mrs. Binta Mukhtar Mrs. Ronke Ayuba	Major Abubakar D.Umar Lt. Col. A. Sarki Muktar Col. Tanko Ayuba	1987-1988 1988-1990 1990-1991
12	Kano	Mrs. Habiba Umaru Mrs. Fatima Idris Garba	WingCommd.UmaruNdanusa Col. Idris Garba	1987-1988 1988-1991
13	Katsina	Mrs. Binta Mukhtar Mrs. Aguda Onoja Mrs. Blessing Y. Madaki	Lt. Col. Abdullahi S. Muktar Col. Lawrence Onoja Col. John Madaki	1988-1989 1988-1990 1990-1991
14	Kwara	Mrs. Nana Fatima Alkali Mrs. Hajarat Kazir	GP. Capt. Ibrahim Alkali Col. Alwali Kazir	1987-1989 1990-1991
15	Lagos	Mrs. Josephine Akhigbe Mrs. Fatima Rasaki	Navy Commd.Mike Akhigbe Col. Raji Rasaki	1987-1988 1988-1991
16	Niger	Mrs. Hairatu Gwadabe	Lt. Col.Lawal Gwadabe	1988-1991
17	Ogun	Mrs. Fatima Rasaki	Col.Raji Rasaki	1987-1988

		Mrs. Kuburat Lawal Mrs. Mojirade Joseph	Navy Capt.Mohammed lawal Navy Capt.Oladeinde Joseph	1988-1990 1990-1991
18	Ondo	Mrs. Feyi George Mrs. Oluremi Olukoya	Navy Capt. Olabode George Navy Capt.Abiodun Olukoya	1987-1990 1990-1991
19	Oyo	Mrs. K. Olurin Mrs. Dorothy Oresanya Mrs. Rahamat O. Adisa	Lt.Col.Tunji Olurin Col. Adedeji Oresanya Col. Abdulkareem Adisa	1987-1988 1988-1990 1990-1991
20	Plateau	Mrs. Aguda Onoja Mrs. Asabe Kama Mrs. Alice Madaki	Col.Lawrence Onoja Lt. Col. Aliyu Kama Col.Joshua Madaki	1987-1988 1988-1990 1990-1991
21	Rivers	Mrs. Ufuoma Ukpo Mrs. Jane Adeleye Mrs. Patience Abbe	Col. AnthonyUkpo GP.Capt. Earnest Adeleye Col.Godwin Abbe	1987-1988 1988-1990 1990-1991
22	Sokoto	Mrs. Binta Daku Mrs. Hauwa Daku Mrs. Hafsatu Magashi	Col. Ahmed Daku Col. Ahmed Daku Col. Bashir Magashi	1987-1988 1988-1990 1990-1991

Source: Bawa, A.B. Women in the Corridors of Power: A History of Nigeria's First Ladies in Governance, 1966-2010. Doctoral Thesis, Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto. 2014.

Maryam Abacha expanded upon the concept of executive spousal power by entrenching women's advocacy directly into the formal cabinet machinery of the federal government. In 1994, under the guidance of the office of the First Lady, the existing National Commission for Women was structurally upgraded into a full-fledged Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development. Crucially, this move secured a permanent seat for a female cabinet minister within the Federal Executive Council, transitioning women's issues from arbitrary "pet projects" into formalized state bureaucracy. On the global stage, Mrs. Abacha leveraged her international stature such as being elected as one of six Vice Presidents at the 1995 UN World Conference on Women in Beijing[59]to project African-specific issues such as displacement, poverty, and rehabilitation into international policy. While recognising these achievements, the constitutional ambiguities surrounding the office, the absence of legal accountability, the dependence of pet projects on state patronage, the duplication of governmental responsibilities, and the sustainability challenges associated with programmes that often declined after the departure of their founders raised some important questions.

The legal challenges mounted by prominent human rights advocates such as Gani Fawehinmi and Femi Falana repeatedly challenged the legitimacy of the office, arguing

[59] A. B. Bawa, "Power Behind the Throne: The Nigeria's First Ladies in Governance," in O. A. Adesina, A. B. Bawa and M. T. Oladejo (eds.) The Odyssey of the Nigerian Woman. United Kingdom, Cambridge Scholars Publishing.2024

that it lacked constitutional authority, public accountability, and statutory funding. By analysing the proliferation of pet projects, fundraising activities, and the replication of First Lady offices at federal, state, and local government levels, the research showed how an unelected institution gradually became embedded within Nigeria's governance structure. It further revealed that many of these projects depended heavily on public resources and political patronage, raising persistent concerns about transparency, continuity, and accountability.[60]

Recognising that the influence of First Ladies was not unique to Nigeria, I extended my research to a broader African context. First Ladies across Africa have emerged as important political actors despite the absence of constitutional authority. It argued that First Ladies have become important intermediaries between the state and society, using political mobilization, electoral campaigns and social intervention programmes to influence governance. By examining experiences from countries such as Ghana, Rwanda, South Africa, Uganda, Zimbabwe, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Mozambique and Nigeria, the study showed that the office of the First Lady has evolved into an informal political institution with continental significance. Through continental organisations such as the African First Ladies Peace Mission and the Organization of African First Ladies for Development (OAFLAD), First Ladies have also emerged as important actors in regional politics.

[60] A. B. Bawa, "The First Lady: Issues and Controversies."

Vice-Chancellor, Sir, the history of governance in Nigeria cannot be fully understood by looking only at the ballot box or the Constitution. My research on the institution of the First Lady demonstrates how women navigated patriarchal exclusion by exercising influence through informal structures of power. In doing so, they broke the proverbial glass ceiling and helped shape Nigeria's social, legal, and political trajectory from within the corridors of power.

Women in Contemporary Insecurity and Conflict

My research subsequently extended beyond political leadership and informal governance into one of the most pressing contemporary issues confronting Nigeria, terrorism and insecurity. While much of the existing literature on terrorism concentrated on military strategies, ideological extremism, and state responses, my work redirected scholarly attention to women, not as perpetrators in the conventional sense, but as victims whose bodies were transformed into instruments of war[61].

By foregrounding the lived experiences of abducted women, the study challenged dominant security narratives that ignored the complex relationship between gender, violence, and agency.

My research demonstrates that Boko Haram deliberately altered its military tactics following intensified counter-

[61] A. B. Bawa, "Women as Victims of Insurgency: A Study of Female Suicide Bombers in Nigeria," *Journal of Arts and Humanities,* 6 (2): 81-90.2017.

insurgency operations during President Goodluck Jonathan Administration by exploiting prevailing gender stereotypes. Women and girls became effective instruments because they attracted less suspicion, could move relatively freely within civilian spaces, and were often forced to conceal explosives under traditional clothing (Hijab). This analysis demonstrated that gender itself became militarised, revealing how insurgent groups manipulated societal assumptions regarding femininity to achieve strategic military objectives.

Building upon my earlier research on women as victims of Boko Haram's insurgency, our subsequent work expanded the analysis beyond the battlefield to investigate the post-conflict experiences of women in Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) camps.[62] While the previous study demonstrated how insurgents transformed women into instruments of terrorism through abduction and forced suicide missions, this research argues that displacement itself constitutes another phase of gendered violence. Rather than finding protection after escaping insurgency, many women entered environments where sexual exploitation, abuse, and institutional neglect continued their victimization.

[62] A. B. Bawa and S. U. Muhammad, "Terrorism and Gender-Based Violence in North-East Nigeria," *Journal of Gender, Politics and Development Studies,* 1(2): 83-102, 2025.

A major contribution of this study is its reconceptualisation of insurgency as a continuum of violence. Existing scholarship often treats displacement as the end point of conflict, assuming that women rescued from Boko Haram have reached safety. This research challenges that assumption by demonstrating that violence persists within humanitarian spaces. It reveals that sexual and gender-based violence in IDP camps is driven by poverty, unequal access to humanitarian assistance, weak institutional protection, disrupted livelihoods, and harmful cultural practices that silence survivors. Consequently, the research shifts scholarly attention from insurgency itself to the enduring structures of violence that emerge in its aftermath. By deconstructing this culture of silence, the study highlights the social and cultural barriers preventing justice for survivors of conflict-related sexual violence. This represents a significant intervention within gender history because it moves beyond documenting violence to analysing the cultural processes that sustain impunity.

Furthermore, the research contributes to gender and conflict historiography by demonstrating that women experience multiple and overlapping forms of insecurity during armed conflict. The study shows that women are subjected to displacement, economic deprivation, sexual exploitation, forced survival strategies, and social exclusion. These intersecting vulnerabilities illustrate that conflict affects women not only through direct violence but also through the collapse of social protection systems and humanitarian support structures. In doing so, the research expands historical understanding of insurgency

beyond military encounters to include everyday experiences of survival and resilience.

This publication also reflects the maturation of my research methodology. It integrates historical analysis with gender studies, humanitarian studies, legal scholarship, and human rights perspectives to examine contemporary conflict from an interdisciplinary standpoint. The collaboration between history and law further illustrates my commitment to producing scholarship that not only interprets historical experiences but also informs public policy and institutional reform.

Searching for Women in Historical Past: Methodological Reflection

Vice-Chancellor, Sir, having taken you through my intellectual journey, permit me to share with the audience what I consider the most profound lesson I have learned from three decades of historical research, beginning with my undergraduate dissertation in 1996/1997. It is a lesson that I hope will be of value to the next generation of gender historians.

My research has confirmed, in very practical terms, what Michel-Rolph Trouillot so powerfully theorized: history is not merely a record of the past but a domain of power in which different actors negotiate what is remembered and what is forgotten. Because the production of history is embedded in relations of power, some historical actors, events, and experiences are privileged, while others are marginalized, omitted, or silenced. As Trouillot reminds us, "silences enter the process of historical production at

four crucial moments." The first is the creation of sources, when historical actors or eyewitnesses decide what to record, what to retell, what to emphasize, and what to leave unsaid. The second is the making of archives, where some documents and oral accounts are preserved while others are deliberately or inadvertently discarded, destroyed, or simply allowed to disappear. The third is the writing of history itself, when historians select their questions, choose their sources, and construct historical narratives. The fourth is the moment of "retrospective significance," when societies decide which histories to remember, celebrate or ignore.[63]

Across my years of research, I have found that women are most frequently silenced or deemphasized in the first three of these moments. Throughout this lecture, I have shown how my own work, together with that of other gender historians, has sought to intervene at the third stage by rewriting historical narratives to restore women to the centre of Nigerian history. But this raises an even more fundamental methodological question: How do we recover women from sources that scarcely mention them in the first place? How do we reconstruct histories that were never fully recorded?

My research on *bori* and on women in contemporary conflict settings has convinced me that the answer lies not only in asking new questions but also in broadening where we search for evidence and what we are prepared to

[63] Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History,* Boston: Beacon Press, 1995, 26-27.

recognize and accept as historical archives. Beyond written documents and conventional oral traditions, African gender historians must take seriously ritual associations, ceremonial performances, songs, dances, festivals, mannerisms, social etiquettes, social idioms, and systems of belief. Scholars have variously described these as "ritual archives" or "living traditions," referring to the social, material, and spiritual practices through which African societies preserve, transmit, and reinterpret historical knowledge across generations.[64] Although such traditions have often been treated primarily as the domain of anthropology, historians must also approach them historically, tracing how they have evolved, adapted, endured, or disappeared over time. Doing so enables us to recover dimensions of the past that conventional archives rarely capture.

A second frontier is the study of material culture. Everyday objects, such as textiles, pottery, cooking utensils and domestic artefacts, as well as domestic landscapes such as houses, compounds, courtyards, and backyards, constitute important repositories of historical meaning. They provide invaluable evidence for reconstructing the lives of women, children, and other groups who are often absent from official archives. As Marina Moskowitz has brilliantly demonstrated in her works, material objects are

[64] Toyin Falola, "Ritual Archives," in A. Aflolayan and T. Falola (eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of African Philosophy,* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. Aminu I. Yandaki, "The Living Traditions among the Hausa: An Excursion into Historical Anthropology of Northern Nigeria, *Arewa House Journal,* Volume 1, No. 1, December 2012, 78-91.

not passive possessions; they embody choices, skills, labour, knowledge, values, and social aspirations of the people who design and use them. Likewise, domestic landscapes, through their buildings, pathways, fences, and other human modifications, reveal how people organized everyday life, negotiated social relationships, and expressed cultural identities.[65]

Finally, gender historians must learn to read official archives against the grain. Colonial records were produced primarily by administrators concerned with taxation, security, political authority, and relations with recognized rulers. Women rarely occupied the centre of their attention. Yet, women sometimes appear briefly in these records. We may find a reference to women traders in a market report, a complaint about a gathering of women, or an official comment on women's court issues, religious and cultural activities. To many historians, such references may appear to be minor details. To the gender historian, however, they are invaluable clues. A passing reference to women traders may illuminate women's economic networks; a complaint about a women's gathering may reveal forms of collective organization and political activism; and an observation about ritual practice may open a window onto women's religious authority. Our task, therefore, is not simply to read what colonial officials intended to tell us, but to ask questions they never intended their records to answer.

[65]Marina Moskowitz, "Backyards and Beyond: Landscapes and History," in Karen Harvey (ed.), *History and Material Culture*, Second Edition, London: Routledge, 2017.

Vice-Chancellor, Sir, if there is one lesson I hope this lecture leaves with our students and young historians, it is this: women were not absent from history because they were absent from the past. More often, they are absent because we have been looking for them in the wrong places and asking the wrong questions. Once we broaden our archives, refine our methods, and interrogate our sources differently, women emerge as central actors in the making of Nigerian history.

Concluding Remarks

Vice-Chancellor, distinguished ladies and gentlemen, I began this lecture with Obaro Kimie's tribute to his wife, and with a question that has quietly defined my entire career: if women stand at the centre of our homes, our institutions, and even the private lives of our greatest historians, why have they stood at the margins of our histories? I hope this lecture has offered an answer. From the Inna who commanded armies in Gobir, to the women scholars of the Sokoto Caliphate; from the combatants of Satiru and the defiance of Gambo Sawaba, to the First Ladies who helped in governing this country; and to the women who have survived, and continue to survive, the violence of insurgency and displacement, one lesson is constant. That is, women have always exercised authority, adapted it under pressure, lost it to conquest and colonialism, and reclaimed it again.

A Nigeria that continues to write half its history from half its experience will continue to build policy, security, and citizenship on an incomplete foundation. Recovering these

narratives is not nostalgia; it is a resource for how we educate our daughters, protect our women in conflict, and reimagine who is permitted to be in a position of leadership.

To rewrite Nigerian history through the lens of gender is not simply to add women to an existing narrative; it is to rethink the narrative itself. Gender history changes not only the answers historians provide but also the questions they ask. Instead of asking only who ruled kingdoms, fought wars, signed treaties, or occupied public office, it compels us to ask who sustained those societies, transmitted knowledge across generations, preserved religious traditions, organized communities, negotiated power within households and markets, and made political authority itself possible. Once these questions are asked, Nigerian history becomes richer, more complex, and ultimately more truthful.

This, I believe, is the future of Nigerian historiography. The challenge before the next generation of historians is no longer simply to recover exceptional women omitted from historical accounts. It is to recognise gender as a fundamental category of historical analysis through which political, economic, religious, intellectual, and social transformations can be more fully understood. It is also to continue expanding the boundaries of historical evidence by taking seriously oral traditions, ritual practices, material culture, domestic spaces, songs, performances, and other living archives through which ordinary people, especially women, have preserved their histories. Therefore, historians need to shift from asking, *where are the women?* to

asking *How has gender shaped the historical processes we seek to explain?* That shift in perspective has the potential to transform not only women's history but political history, economic history, religious history, military history, and indeed the entire enterprise of Nigerian historiography.

The task before us, then, is not simply to add women to Nigerian history. It is to write Nigerian history as though women had always belonged there, because they always did.

Thank you.

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Picture Gallery

Guest Lecturer, Sokoto State University, Sokoto
Theme: "Local Standard: Nigeria's Gender Inclusion and Development Implications" on 11th June, 2026

At International Conference in London, UK
August, 2013

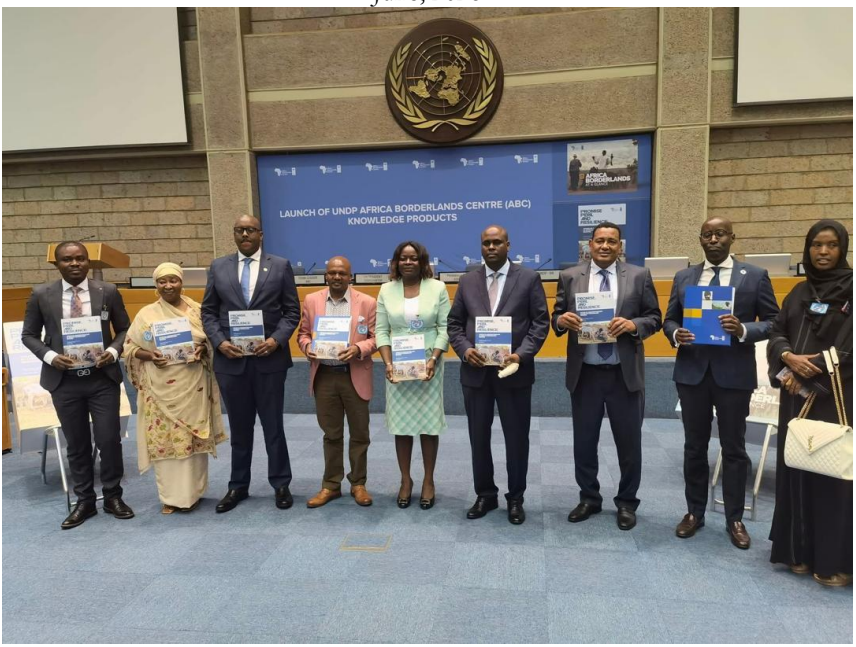
At International Conference in Vancouver, British Colombia, Canada
August, 2018

Together with my husband at ASUU National Conference on the State of the Nation, Abuja -Nigeria
2024

With my Daughter and Grandson

At a workshop in Dakar (Senegal) on African Women Shaping the World: Activism, Networks and Connections (1920s-1970s)

June, 2026



At Lunch of UNDP African Borderlands Centre (ABC) Knowledge Products, Nairobi, Kenya

December, 2022

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