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WOMEN'S ANTI-COLONIAL STRUGGLE IN NOLLYWOOD FILM: FOCUS ON 1929 (ABA WOMEN'S WAR) …

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Abstract: *This study examined women's anti-colonial struggle as portrayed in the Nollywood film "1929," produced by Moses Eskor, based on the events of the 1929 Aba Women's War in South-Eastern Nigeria during the Colonial era. It also analysed colonial policies, such as Indirect Rule and the imposition of tax on women, and their responses. The study adopted the qualitative research design based on a historical approach. Data was collected from primary and secondary sources. The primary sources comprised archival materials and oral interviews with traditional rulers, women, and men from South-Eastern Nigeria, while the secondary sources included journals, articles, books, and theses. The study revealed that South-Eastern Nigerian women played significant roles beyond the traditional societal expectations of them as homemakers and child-bearers, emerging as freedom fighters. These women were not silent victims of colonial oppression but symbols of nationalism and core drivers of economic growth who actively fought against colonial hegemony and struggled for their rights.*

INTRODUCTION

In Nigeria, women are generally perceived as 'less than men' in terms of strength, capacity, and contributions to society. However, this is only a partial truth, as history demonstrates that Nigerian women have significantly contributed to the socioeconomic, military, and political spheres of the nation and their communities, leading to tremendous societal progress over time. Thus, women should be recognised as more than merely "… passive recipients of welfare-enhancing assistance; they are active agents of change and dynamic promoters of social transformations that can profoundly impact the lives of both men and women" (Sen, 1999).

In the pre-Colonial period, Nigerian women undertook various economic functions within the social system. They engaged in agriculture, fishing, handicrafts, and trade alongside their male counterparts. Women had the right to their

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income; however, this income usually contributed to the family finances. This economic freedom contrasts with many Western societies, like in Britain where … men dominated the public domain, engaging in employment, politics, and financial matters, while women were increasingly confined to the domestic sphere, focusing on household and family responsibilities (Gordon & Nair, 2000). There, women had to fight for the right to work (Qualls, 1990). The greatest threat to the influence and privileges of women in Nigeria occurred during the 20th century when patriarchy combined with Colonialism altered gender relations. As male chiefs collaborated with the British Colonial administration in collecting taxes and governance, the position of women declined in importance. With the economy increasingly focused on producing cash crops for export, Nigerian men and European firms dominated the distribution of rubber, cocoa, groundnuts (peanuts), and palm oil. A previous land-tenure system that had prevented land alienation gave way to land commercialisation, favouring those with access to money gained from the sale of cash crops. Western-style education also favoured males over females, largely excluding women from many of the new occupations introduced by Colonialism (Falola, 2023).

The Nigerian film industry, Nollywood, serves as a platform for cultural analysis and readily portrays the progress Nigerian women have made in ascending the political and socioeconomic ladders of society. Yet it illustrates that everything they have worked hard to achieve is deemed irrelevant unless they conform to the cultural construct of a "good woman" in their domestic lives. Women are frequently portrayed as powerful in these films, but their power is often depicted as diabolical, particularly in social and domestic relations (Abah,2008). This is why a film like *1929*, the primary case study for this research, is essential, as it brings a fresh perspective to Nigerian cinema by portraying women as heroes and drivers of revolutionary change in society. Based on historical events, *1929* is a cinematic depiction of Nigerian women whose roles in history defied major cultural and religious restrictions placed on the female gender in Nigeria. “Aba Women’s War” started in Oloko (Owerri Province) on November 23, 1929, after a rumour was spread that women were going to be taxed (Raphael,2012). It resulted in the death of over fifty women, and dozens were injured due to rifle fire ordered by white officers (Van Allen, 1975). It is a significant historical event that warrants examination to understand its contribution to recognise Nigerian women's roles in shaping the nation's history.

Colonial Rule and the Aba Women’s War

British rule in South-Eastern Nigeria emerged as a necessity for the British government. It began with the Berlin Act of 1885, leading to the annexation of the Oil Rivers trading area. The London Gazette of 5 June 1885 announced that:

Under and by virtue of certain treaties concluded between the month of July last and the present

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data and by other lawful means, the territory [sic] on the West Coast of Africa hereinafter referred to as the Niger District were placed under the protection of Her Majesty the Queen from the date of the said treaties respectively. (London Gazette 2581)

On 1st January 1900, the Niger Coast Protectorate became the Protectorate of South-Eastern Nigeria, merging with territories previously under the Royal Niger Company. The headquarters were moved from Calabar to Lagos in 1906 (Catalogue of Correspondence, 1894–1999). The origin of the war is traceable to January 1, 1914, when the first Nigerian Colonial governor, Lord Lugard, introduced the Indirect Rule in South-Eastern Nigeria. This implies that the British Colonial administrators would rule through “warrant chiefs,” basically Igbo people appointed by the governor. Traditionally Igbo chiefs were elected (Galley. 1970).

The film *1929* vividly portrays the Colonial Native Authority structure introduced in Nigeria by Lord Lugard’s Indirect Rule. This system allowed Africans a degree of internal self-governance. In the decentralised South-Eastern Nigeria, the British sought to identify or invent chiefs to facilitate local self-government. Thus, pre-Colonially, women were active participants in democracy through patrilineal, village, and religio-cultural organisations, through which they advocated for women’s affairs, lobbied for their needs, and disseminated information among themselves (Crowder 197-205). However, Colonial Indirect Rule altered this. Colonial authorities used indigenous or assumed rulers in South-Eastern Nigeria, particularly among the Igbo, Efik, Ibibio, and Ijaw. Some were traditional village heads, while others were nonentities or rogues presented to the British authorities by their people, who assumed they were sending them off into the slave trade or as messengers of the British. This new class of leaders, called Warrant Chiefs, were given certificates, or 'warrants' of leadership by colonial authorities, symbolised by caps, and were thus known as Warrant Chiefs (Falola et al 27). They were granted unprecedented power, unlike in the pre-Colonial era, which inevitably led to corruption and oppression. The film depicts their acceptance of bribes in the form of cheap European goods, such as gin, whiskey, powdered milk, and gunpowder, in exchange for supporting women's taxation, thereby betraying the women they were meant to protect.

Under the Native Courts Proclamation No. 9 of 1900, Native Courts were established, providing legal backing for the Native Courts System and the position of Warrant Chief (Yakubu 2002). In the film *1929*, Mr. Bulu is the Warrant Chief appointed over Ikot Abasi. A second class of chiefs, known as minor chiefs or headmen, were appointed as representatives of the Warrant Chief in wards and villages. They were akin to "Warrant Chiefs on Probation", selected to succeed a deceased or disgraced Warrant Chief (Afigbo 417). In the film, *Warrant Chief Bulu* replaced *Warrant Chief Okpala*. In some areas, these headmen, referred to as *Idimala*, became

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as arrogant as the Warrant Chiefs and exploited the villagers. Given significant power without prior leadership experience, the abuse of power became inevitable. According to a Colonial official, recorded by Allen J.G.C.,

… these Warrant Chiefs soon enjoyed power and authority to which they possessed no traditional right or title and most of them created an entirely artificial administrative structure in which the elders were pushed aside and authority was granted to a cadre of 'Headmen' whose only qualification for their position were a tough and ruthless personality and a capacity for blind obedience to the dictates of the 'Warrant Chief. (RH, Mss Afr. s. 1551).

The film *1929* vividly depicts the power-drunk behaviour of Warrant Chiefs and the blind devotion of their headmen and subordinates, including their use of armed force against unarmed women. Another historical fact portrayed is the insufficient number of British Colonial officers. Aside from the District Officer and Native Court judge, all other colonial officials were Nigerian men from the region. This shortage resulted from World War I in 1914, which necessitated the withdrawal of political officers with military training, depleting staff in the South-Eastern region. This increased reliance on Warrant Chiefs, who, without proper supervision, became "hopelessly corrupt and oppressive"(Korieh 66). This corruption influenced the women's reactions.

The British disregarded the existing socio-political systems of the South-Eastern peoples and sought to overhaul traditional structures. However, they could not ignore the economic power and independence of the women. Taxing the women was the immediate cause of the Aba Women's Riot. The film portrays women as possessing significant economic power, widely recognised for their industrious nature and considerable wealth. It highlights their dominant role in the production, processing, and marketing of palm oil and kernels, showcasing their influence within this industry. Despite men owning land, women worked and managed the produce, maintaining economic independence and political influence (Korieh 116-117). Early 20th-century reports noted that women brought palm oil to markets (D. O. Okigwe, "Trade Prices at Up Country Markets, 1917"). Women like Omu Okwei of Ossomari and Ruth Onumonu Uzoaru of Oguta acted as produce agents, buying from local producers and reselling to European factories from the late 1920s (Ekejuba 343). Oral evidence indicates that women frequently visited the buying stations at Umuahia, Ife, and Udo beaches in Mbaise, where palm produce was transported by river to the coast (Korieh 117).

Colonial taxation in 1927 led some men to pawn themselves or their children to meet tax demands. Archdeacon Benson observed that individuals borrowed money they could not repay to fulfil their tax obligations, resorting even to pawning their children or themselves ("Report of the Commission of Inquiry" 95). Although men were taxed, women indirectly contributed through trade profits. Thus,

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indicating their financial contributions to society amid the ongoing economic crisis that reduced the prices of their oil products. The price of palm kernel per 50lb dropped from 5s. 9d. in 1928 to 4s. 6d. in 1929, and palm oil from 7s. 0d. to 5s. 10d, drastically reducing women's income (Memorandum of the Secretary par 160). Frustrated by the tax burdens, women resisted both the rumoured taxation of women and taxation in general, as portrayed in the film *1929*. Agitations over the increase in commodity prices and the issue of taxation occurred concurrently because low commodity prices incited the women and predisposed them to protest against the government, while the tax revolts provided an opportunity to raise the issue of commodity prices before the authorities.

Imposition of Taxation on South-Eastern women and women's war

The immediate cause of the Women's War, a central theme in the film *1929*, was the imposition of taxes on women. Unlike in Northern Nigeria, where taxation had commenced under the Emirate system, the south-east operated a democratic system based on communal labour and agreed levies. However, Lugard's Native Authority system failed due to its non-traditional nature and the absence of a Native Treasury to fund local development. Despite warnings from South-Eastern Province officers, Sir Hugh Clifford and Lt. Col. Moorhouse introduced direct taxation in South-Eastern Nigeria to support the system's administration. Taxation was implemented under the regulations of the 1916 Native Revenue Ordinance, which involved a detailed assessment of the people's wealth through a census and the collection of taxes via their chiefs (Afigbo 420).

Mr. W. E. Hunt led a sensitisation campaign, assessing lands, produce, trade profits, and livestock. Officers proposed a flat rate of 2.5% tax for all male adults, which was formalised in 1928 with the support of Warrant Chiefs, Colonial officials, and Native Courts (Report of the Commission of Inquiry 4-5). Notably, this coincided with an economic recession and increased import duties in 1929, adversely affecting the palm produce trade dominated by women. Consequently, the economic climate was unfavourable and the atmosphere was tense. By 1929, rumours of a census of women and their belongings further heightened the women's frustration and akin to a man sitting on a keg of gunpowder, the situation erupted into the Women's Riot (Assessment Reports, Owerri Division Records, 421).

In September 1929, the Acting District Officer in Bendel District of Owerri Province instructed Warrant Chiefs to provide detailed information about all taxable males, including details about their wives, children, and domestic animals. Although he clarified that the census was not intended to tax women, including women in the context sparked rumours of a plan to tax them (Afigbo 236).

In response, the women of Owerri and Calabar Provinces mobilised through their existing organisations, awaiting the day the government

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would begin counting (Umoren 64). The women of Oloko region called a meeting at Orie market. One woman recounted,

We, women, held a large meeting at which we decided to wait until we heard definitely from one person that women were to be taxed, in which case we would make trouble as we did not mind being killed for doing so. We went to the houses of all the chiefs and each admitted counting his people (Perham, 206).

The Warrant Chief at Oloko, "Okugo," hesitated to commence the count due to opposition from the women. However, under pressure from the authorities to complete the count by 26 November, he dispatched Mark *Emeruwa*, an unemployed schoolteacher, to carry out the task. On 23 November, *Emeruwa* began his duties at the residence of *Nwanyeruwa,* a widow, and their heated exchange quickly escalated into a confrontation. Threatened with discipline by *Okugo, Nwanyeruwa* fled to a previously scheduled women's meeting. Her account convinced the women that the tax threat was indeed real (Gailey 108). This exchange is depicted in the film *1929*, although the film follows the British account, beginning at Ukam rather than Oloko. Palm leaves were dispatched to nearby villages, calling on women to gather in Oloko for support.

The women 'sat on' Emeruwa at his residence in the Niger Delta Pastorate Mission before subsequently besieging Okugo's compound (Report of the Commission of Inquiry, 14). According to Allen and Leith-Ross (59-85), the pidgin English expressions "making war" or "sitting on a man" was an institutionalised punishment employed by Igbo women. This involved gathering at a man's compound, dancing, singing scurrilous songs detailing the women's grievances against him (often insulting him by questioning his manhood), banging on his hut with pestles, and, in extreme cases, dismantling his hut. The women would remain until he repented and promised to amend his ways. 'Women's War' thus represents a traditional method women use to address grievances and signifies their struggle for women's rights (Allen 59-85).

Attacked by Okugo's men, the women initially retreated but returned with greater force. Some representatives went to the District Officer (DO) at Bende to charge Okugo with assault. The DO arrived to find more than a thousand women gathered. The women demanded the cap, the symbol of authority, of Warrant Chief Okugo, seeking his arrest and trial. This demand was met on 29 November, after six days of mass protests, when the DO charged Okugo and took him to Bende. Unsatisfied with the arrest alone, the women continued to converge on Bende. The DO described the scene as follows:

The women, numbering over 10,000, were shouting and yelling round the office in a frenzy. They demanded his cap of office, which I threw to them, and it met the same fate as a fox's carcass thrown to a pack of hounds. The station between the office and the prison resembled Epsom Downs on Derby Day (Perham 207).

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The women camped around the court until Okugo was tried and sentenced to two years in prison on 3 December. After the verdict, they dispersed peacefully. This victory triggered a ripple effect across South-Eastern Nigeria, with women protesting against taxation, Warrant Chiefs, and native courts. Following the Oloko model, they dismantled court buildings, destroyed records, and freed prisoners in Ayaba, Asa, Azumini, and Obohia. On 9 December, women from Okpala, Nguru, Ayaba, and Oloko gathered at Owerrinta, stripping chiefs of their caps and disrupting court proceedings. They demanded an end to taxation for women, increased prices for produce, reduced costs for imported goods, and lower taxes on men (Bastian 261). On 10 December, the District Officer (DO), Mr. Ferguson, held a meeting at Owerrinta with approximately four thousand women from Oloko and Ayaba districts in the Bende Division, Ngor and Okpala districts in the Owerri Division, and other towns in the Owerrinta District. The women voiced their grievances regarding the rumoured taxation and low produce prices, which the DO denied. They ultimately demanded the complete abolition of all forms of taxation (Afolabi 25).

15 December marked a major climax of the conflict. On this date, the women attacked the lorry of Assistant Commissioner of Police Mr. Matthews and invaded Ngor Native Court, freeing prisoners, tearing court books, and destroying buildings. In Okpala, Ngor, and Nguru, women demanded the judicial caps of Warrant Chiefs, demolishing the homes of those who refused to comply. During the riots, twenty-one members of the Nguru Native Court were either assaulted or had their properties destroyed, while fourteen members in the Ngor area and sixteen in Okpala suffered the same fate (Report of Mr. Matthews).

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In Aba, the town that inspired the war's popular name, the women maintained a peaceful stance until 10 December 1929, when they gathered at the market square to protest. A court messenger reported that they had learned of a demonstration by women in Owerrinta and decided to join in because the rumoured tax on women would directly impact them:

They had heard the women at Owerrinta were making noise and demonstrating, and they too should demonstrate because if it was true that women were to be taxed, it would affect them.

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They said there would be more along in the morning and they would come to fight about this statement that women were to pay tax (Report of the Commission of Inquiry 36).

At approximately 10 p.m., around 400 women marched to Mr. Toovey's residence, where the District Officer was staying. They threw stones and sticks, causing damage to the building. Mr. Toovey's attempts to dissuade them were unsuccessful, and he ultimately fired shots into the air to disperse the crowd (Report of the Commission of Inquiry 36).

The following morning, large groups of women gathered in Aba for a meeting at Eke Akpara. They assaulted Mr. Logius, an agent of Messrs. Ollivants, and damaged the house of Mr. Henderson, the Area Supervisor of the United Africa Company (UAC). While sitting by the roadside, two women, Nwanyioma and Ukwa, were struck and killed by Dr. Hunter's car, resulting in further chaos. In retaliation, the women vandalised the doctor's car, invaded Barclays Bank, and approached the United Africa Company, chanting, "Doctor has killed women of our party."

The film portrays women's struggle for economic independence and their resistance against unjust taxation. They protested to safeguard themselves and future generations, understanding that the taxes were intended to reduce government expenditure rather than contribute to development. The Women's War was a landmark event in the fight against Colonialism, representing the first instance of women collectively opposing colonial oppression (Eboh). "The war was a demonstration by a group of women reacting to the unjust imposition of taxes, on behalf of all women, the entire region, and Nigerians as a whole." (Omalu)

The women's resistance represents a violent struggle by one of the most historically oppressed social classes against patriarchal injustice and the oppressive actions of a hostile government and a male-dominated colonial hegemony. When the women felt intimidated by the colonial government, they revolted, in defence of their rights (Onyia). Women perceived native courts and chiefs as bastions of colonial oppression. Examples of their resistance included ambushing warrant officers, demonstrating at Chief King Jaja Pepple's palace, and abducting the son of a warrant chief. The Women's War and its filmic representation, *1929*, depict women combating exploitation and taxation before men joining the liberation struggle. Although the triumphs of the Decolonisation Movement of the 1940s and 1950s are attributed mainly to men, with the notable exceptions of women like Margaret Ekpo and Fumilayo Kuti, the Aba Women's Riots underscored the significant role women played in anti-colonial struggles (Eboh) with over 25,000 women losing their lives according to colonial records (Report of the Commission of Inquiry 97). "The war is also one of the factors responsible for women's inclusion in governance today, women are now carried

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along and allowed to attain key heights in society" (Onyia).

The film *1929* highlights the significance of women's socio-cultural and commercial networks in the Women's War. These networks provided structure, communication channels, and leadership before and during the conflict. Colonial anthropologists Sylvia Leith-Ross and M. M. Green described these networks as crucial in uniting the otherwise decentralised Igbo societies. Women's meetings, or *mikiri,* were regular forums for debate, decision-making, and news dissemination.

Consequently, it was not uncommon for women in the district, particularly those from Oloko, to discuss the taxation issue at every opportunity, and they were unanimously opposed to the new census. For instance, Nwayeruwa went to the meeting place first when the mission teacher and the colonial security officers came to count her property. Subsequently, women's meetings became the venues for decision-making and action. In the film, key meeting centres included the homes of Mama Yoruba and Adahia Edem, which were pivotal for organising actions. Despite the War's outcomes, women demonstrated their ability to form a formidable opposition without using weapons or centralised authority, utilising their social and commercial networks. "This was because women are communal beings who like to operate in communities, to fight and ensure they win" (Omalu). Green said these organisations acted as social glue, binding the decentralised South-Eastern Igbo societies (Green 32).

Aba Women as an Embodiment of Women's Nationalism

Nationalism, as defined by Coleman, 'includes sentiments, activities and organisational developments aimed explicitly at the self-government and independence of Nigeria as a nation-state, existing based on equality in an international state system' (Falola 136). The nationalist movement in Nigeria commenced in the 1940s and persisted until independence in 1960. However, earlier nationalist struggles, such as the Women's War of 1929, also occurred. Women from South-Eastern Nigeria fought for liberation and reform within the colonial system, resisting colonial hegemony.

The Women's War exemplifies nationalism and underscores the crucial role of women in the movement. Their protest symbolised a yearning for freedom from colonial repression and bolstered the nationalist cause (Fwatshak). The war "was an important demonstration of nationalism, and its impact continues to live on and shape women's movements. Today, women are inspired to speak up against injustice and go as far as demonstrating when they are being mishandled and their rights trampled upon" (Anago).

The film *1929* highlights the extent of colonial oppression and the decisive actions of the women, showcasing their patriotism and desire for self-determination. The Women's War, a significant historical event, has become a source

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of national pride and has garnered national and international attention over the years (Oko). It also serves as a source of inspiration for Nigerian women resisting various forms of oppression and injustice in society. In 1966, for instance, Imilike and its neighbouring community -Obollo, both in Udenu L.G.A., Enugu State, "was under siege by armed robbers, who attacked the community and would go as far as killing women and children during their raids. The women devised a strategic plan to put an end to the killings. One morning the women gathered like a multitude of locust and began walking silently through the town, with their wrappers tied on their chest and another on their heads. When they got to any house, they would chant in unison, "ho ho" They walked round the town until they arrived at the Igwe's palace, where they sat in front of the Igwe's palace, and because they were so many, they extended into the road. They remained silent and kept repeating their chant, until the Igwe and all the elders pleaded with them repeatedly to state their grievances. After all the pleading, the women finally spoke and demanded that the armed robberies and killings stop immediately, otherwise they would take over and take matters into their own hands" (Abugu). Their strategy, inspired by the legendary Aba Women, proved to be highly effective because, "violent conflicts in Udenu ceased that day and till today, Udenu LGA remains very peaceful."

The Authenticity of 1929 as a Historical Source

The filmmakers of *1929* portrayed the South-South-Eastern Nigerian Women's War commendably, yet the film lacks historical authenticity in key aspects of the women's protest. Although the film depicted the women's demands for an end to taxation and the surrender of the warrant officers' caps, it failed to address their calls for increased local produce prices and reduced costs of imported goods, which were crucial motivators behind their protests. Additionally, the film omitted significant historical details, such as the attacks on District Officers in Aba, Oloko, and Owerrinta. In Aba, for instance, the women threw stones at the District Officer, Mr. Mathews, and other British commercial agents like Dr Hunter. Highlighting these facts would have enriched the plot and enhanced the film's credibility as a reliable historical source. The film also neglected other forms of protest employed by the women, such as jailbreaks to free prisoners, attacks on courthouses and destruction of court records, and protests at colonial banks and commercial firms. Instead, fictional events, such as the kidnapping of Officer Okpala's son, were emphasised despite lacking a historical basis. Despite these omissions, it is understandable that such details might have been excluded due to the challenges of representing history in film, including financial constraints and censorship.

However, "The preservation of Nigerian women's history through film is a highly commendable endeavour, one that promises to yield significant positive effects. History serves as a means of addressing past wrongs, offering valuable lessons that can guide society towards a better future. When made more accessible

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through film, these narratives become even more powerful, ensuring that people are less likely to repeat the mistakes of the past. As a method of documenting history, this approach holds great potential to shape societal consciousness and foster meaningful progress" (Onyia).

Conclusion

The historical film *1929* brings to life the Aba Women's War, a powerful and well-organised resistance movement led by women from South-Eastern Nigeria against British colonial rule. This uprising was a direct response to oppressive colonial policies, including the appointment of warrant chiefs, taxation of men, the introduction of a census, and, most controversially, the imposition of taxes on women. These changes disrupted the traditional socio-political structure, stripping women of the rights and privileges they had previously enjoyed.

However, *Aba Women's War* challenges the notion that these women were merely passive victims of patriarchy and colonial oppression. Instead, it portrays them as fierce warriors and influential figures in economic development, demonstrating their resilience, agency, and determination in the fight for justice. Through *1929*, their legacy is preserved, serving as a testament to their role in shaping history.

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