

# **Vestiges Biographical Sketch Series**

**2018**

**Sketch 1**

## **Lagos Women in Colonial History: a biographical sketch of Alimotu Pelewura**

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From the 1920s until her death in 1951, Alimotu Pelewura served as the president of Lagos Market Women Association (LMWA) and remained at the forefront of anti-colonial campaigns. In the February 24<sup>th</sup> 1947 issue, the editor of *West African Pilot* described Pelewura as the “mother of metropolitan Lagos.” She collaborated with Herbert Macaulay, a politician, and journalist to challenge colonial policies that were detrimental to women’s interests as well as those of the community of Lagos.

Pelewura was born in Lagos in 1871. Her father was Abibu Pelewura, a trader and a Muslim, who helped to construct the Koranic Central Mosque in Lagos. Like her father, she was a devout Muslim and was later honored as the Lady President of the Koranic Muslim community on January 27, 1946. She adopted her mother’s work as a fishmonger, and by the end of 1900, she was well established in the fish-selling business. In the 1920s, she was elected as the *Alaga* (Chair-woman) of Araromi market.

After Macaulay founded the Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP) in 1923, he sought an alliance with Pelewura. Inspired by Macaulay’s example, she created and led the LMWA, which was the central organization for all market women in Lagos. LMWA consisted of about 8,000 members during Pelewura’s administration. Before Southern Nigerian women gained the right to vote in the 1950s, she promoted the NNDP’s objectives and helped to support the election of its male candidates to the Lagos Town Council and the Nigerian Legislative Council. By 1925, one thousand market women had registered as members of the NNDP. Although Pelewura and many of her followers were unlettered, they collaborated with literate politicians like Macaulay to convey their ideas in petitions to colonial authorities.

During the 1940s, Pelewura organized market women against unjust economic policies and promoted the cause of Nigerian nationalists and workers. After the governor attempted to legislate an Income Tax Ordinance, which would have applied to women who earned over 50 pounds, Pelewura and her supporters organized against this law. On December 16, 1940, Pelewura ordered the markets to be closed; she and her supporters marched to the commissioner of colony’s office to present a petition against the tax ordinance. As a result of this opposition, the governor increased the taxable annual income to 100 pounds. During the first general workers’ strike (June 22-August 6 1945) in Nigeria, which involved about 40,000 workers, Pelewura instructed traders to provide credit and

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discount on food-stuff to the strikers. In 1947, Falolu, the *Oba* (King) of Lagos honored Pelewura with the title of *Erelu* of the common people. On March 10, 1951, close to 10,000 people attended her funeral. In 1981, a market was named after Pelewura on Lagos Island.

Pelewura's activism and support for nationalist politics have been well documented in Cheryl Johnson-Odim's biographies of Pelewura, Lisa Lindsay's *Working with Gender: Wage Labor and Social Change in Southwestern Nigeria*, and Hon. Adekunle Alli's 2006 newspaper article available on OurLagosHistory.com. Alli's article complements Johnson Odim's publications. It adds to the existing literature by expanding on Pelewura's father's relationship to Islam and her first encounter with Macaulay in 1908. Alli and Johnson-Odim, however, offered different accounts of Pelewura's marriage and her date of birth.

Further research can provide more insight into Pelewura's leadership in the market. Johnson-Odim, for instance, noted that Lagos market women were never centrally unified following Pelewura's death (1981:9). To what extent is this true? What were the differences and similarities between Pelewura's management and those of subsequent leaders of market women in Lagos? Which economic and social norms did she apply in her work as a trader? How did she confront challenges to her leadership? Finally, how did her Islamic beliefs and practices shape her political and economic career? Engaging these questions can provide more insights into how Pelewura became influential in organizing market women in Lagos.

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**Note on sources:** this piece uses material from *OurLagosHistory.com*. This is a digital archive on the cultural, social, and political history of Lagos. The website provides open access to unique and rare historical materials from the private archives of Chief Honorable Adekunle Alli, an octogenarian and public historian of Lagos, and those of the late Professor Olakunle Lawal, a scholar of Nigerian decolonization history. Readers can discover their unpublished writings, read published work afresh and engage with (now digitized) primary records that were collected from Nigeria and United Kingdom archives by Alli and Lawal.

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