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Ada Priscilla Nzimiro: *The First Igbo Woman Doctor*

By Idenze Ezeme

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FEATURE
IMAGE

Ada Priscilla Nzimiro

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ADA PRISCILLA NZIMIRO

Ada Priscilla Nzimiro: The First Igbo Woman Doctor

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Ada Priscilla Nzi (April 30, 1923 – March 22, 1951) was a groundbreaking figure in Nigerian history. She is the first Igbo woman to practice modern medicine in Eastern Nigeria. Her life was filled with remarkable achievements, great potential, and tragic early death, leaving a lasting impact that continues to inspire generations.

Nzimiro was born in the commercial centre of Port Harcourt. She was from Oguta, a town in what is now called Imo State. She was the daughter of the renowned politician Richard Okwosha Nzimiro, who became the first native mayor of Port Harcourt. He served as mayor from 1956 until he passed away in 1959. Her mother, Mary Nwametu Onumonu, was a successful businesswoman deeply interested in politics and helping less privileged people. Mary strongly advocated for Igbo women's education and economic empowerment, influencing Ada's hopes and dreams.

During the difficult Biafran War in the late 1960s, Mary Nzimiro worked hard to support the war efforts. However, this came at a great cost, as she lost many properties in Port Harcourt due to discrimination against the Igbo people. Ada Priscilla Nzimiro's legacy continues, largely thanks to her mother's strong influence. She inspires others to strive for progress and equality, even when it is impossible.

Ada's academic journey was an excellent tale of hard work, strength, and success. She started her studies at Queen's College in Lagos, a well-known school for its high standards and support of young women. In 1945, driven by her ambition and a wish to surmount hurdles, Ada went to Glasgow, Scotland. There, she embarked on the very tough

journey of medical training at the highly regarded University of Glasgow. Getting a medical degree was a big achievement, especially for Nigerian women.

By 1950, Ada had won the Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery degree (MB, ChB), a feat of great proportion that made her the first Igbo woman to achieve such a milestone. She graduated two years before the University College Hospital (UCH) was set up in Nigeria, showing the pioneering spirit that marked her journey. This was a great personal victory for Ada and brought hope and inspiration to many others in her community.

The success brought pride to her family and community. Ada's parents, Mary and Richard, belonged to one of the richest and most powerful families in Port Harcourt. They used their resources to give Ada the best educational opportunities, helping her develop her talents and ambitions.

Their strong belief in education as a way to change lives didn't stop with Ada. Mary later showed her commitment to learning in West Africa by providing scholarships to students from Nigeria, Ghana, and Sierra Leone who wanted to continue their education. Her support helped many people access education, showing her dedication to empowering future generations.

Ada's life, with all its great accomplishments, came to a tragic and premature end. She died on March 22, 1951, at the tender age of 27, leaving behind a legacy that was beginning to unfold. Many sources say that she died in the lively city of Glasgow, but some people believe she might have gone back to her home country of Nigeria just before her sudden death. The exact reason for her death is still unknown; there are rumours of foul play fueled by jealousy from people who may have been upset by her great success.

The news of Ada's death broke the hearts of her family. They had felt so happy about the many amazing things she had accomplished. Her family's hearts, once full of pride and joy, were now heavy with

sadness as they faced this deep loss.

The lasting memory of Ada Priscilla Nzimiro lives on through the schools she started and the good memories she created. In a moving act of commemoration after her death, her mother took the major step of renaming the William Wilberforce Academy in Oguta —founded in 1945—to the Priscilla Memorial Grammar School. This change of name honours Ada's outstanding achievements and is a leading light for young women desirous of overcoming societal barriers in education and their work lives.

The impact of the Nzimiro family goes beyond individual feats by Ada. Her parents had remarkable roles to play in the city of Port Harcourt and its environs, thereby contributing immensely to the history of this community. Upon his successful career with the United Africa Company (UAC), Richard Nzimiro was elected the pioneer Chairman of Port Harcourt Local Government Council, thus setting a good framework for local administration in Nigeria for generations to come.

Mary Nzimiro: The Powerhouse Behind a Legacy of Success

Mary Nzimiro was one of the first Igbo women millionaires and the mother of Ada Priscilla Nzimiro, who became the first Igbo woman to practice modern medicine.

She was born Mary Onumonu in Oguta. Later, she built a successful career as a trader in Port Harcourt, becoming the largest agent for the United Africa Company, UAC. Her business expanded so much that, at its height, she made up to £150,000 yearly, which was a great deal then. Mary Nzimiro was a brilliant businesswoman, politician, and activist.



A photo of Mary Nzimiro at a marketplace. Photo: ConnectNigeria

In 1951, she supported her husband Richard Nzimiro's political campaign and made him win an election. She also worked to empower women by creating a cooperative that helped many start their businesses.

She worked hard, had a vision, and was committed to serving others; therefore, Madam Mary Nzimiro did quite a meaningful work in her community, opening doors for progress and inspiring future generations.

She was involved in politics and economics and played leading roles in the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons—NCNC. She advocated for women's rights and championed education.

Ada did amazing things, making her one of the first African women to make important medical contributions. Dr. Agnes Yewande Savage made history twenty-one years earlier, becoming the first West African woman to earn a medical degree. She graduated from the

University of Edinburgh in 1929. On the other hand, Dr Elizabeth Abimbola Awoliyi was the first female doctor ever to practice in Nigeria. She graduated from the University of Dublin in 1938. Ada's achievements are not just her own; they form part of a larger story of women brave enough to break through the barriers of a male-dominated field.

Ada Priscilla Nzimiro lived a short life, but her impact is still felt and inspires many people. She was a leader in medicine and bravely overcame social obstacles to pave the way for future generations of women who want to join jobs that were once seen as out of reach. Her journey is a powerful tale of education and the importance of hard work. It brings us back to the great impact of those who dare to challenge the status quo. Today, her name is being mentioned in Nigerian history as a symbol of hope and proof of the amazing successes that can be achieved through strength and a clear vision.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Idenze Ezeme

Nze is an Igbo history and culture enthusiast with an in-depth passion for exploring the rich cultural heritage, traditions, and historical narratives of the Igbo people. His works is mostly focused on pre-colonial Igbo societies, traditional belief systems, leadership systems, and the impact of European colonialism.



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