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Eze Ede:

The Women's Leadership in Igbo Agricultural and Social Traditions

By Chuka Odike

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FEATURE
IMAGE

Igbo woman harvest's cocoyam in large quantities.

Article image · caption retained from the published Ozikoro article

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Ndị Ngwa, around Aba, photographed by Northcote Thomas, c. 1913. MAA Cambridge.

In Igbo society, agriculture has always been more than a means of sustenance; it is a symbol of status, leadership, and communal influence. While yam cultivation is traditionally the domain of men, with titles such as Eze Ji (King of Yams) recognizing successful farmers, women have their own prestigious agricultural titles associated with cocoyam farming. Among the Ngwa people of Aba and other parts of southern Igbo land (Abia, Imo, and Rivers States), successful female farmers are honoured with titles such as Eze Ede, Ezumezu, and Lọlọ Ede. These titles elevate women to positions of social and political authority, showcasing the dualistic and complementary nature of Igbo leadership structures.



Cocoyam (Ede) bagged to be sold in wholesale quantity.

01

Eze Ede: King of Cocoyams

In Igbo cosmology, cocoyams (edé) are considered the spiritual and folkloric female equivalent of yams (Jì). Women who achieve exceptional success in farming and storing large quantities of cocoyam receive the title Eze Ede, meaning “King of Cocoyams.” This title grants them a significant role in their communities, particularly as spokeswomen for women’s interests.



Ede (Cocoyam) – Lilian Nke

www.NigerianFoodTV.com

The Eze Ede are respected not only for their agricultural achievements but also for their leadership qualities. They serve as custodians of traditional knowledge related to farming, food security, and economic empowerment. These women often have a say in village councils and decision-making processes, ensuring that women’s voices are heard in community matters.

02

Ezumezu and Lọlọ Ede: Higher Ranks in Female Leadership

Women with even larger mkpuke ede (cocoyam stores) may attain the higher title of Ezumezu. This title signifies extraordinary success in agriculture and economic wealth, elevating the recipient to an elite status among women. In some Igbo communities, the equivalent title is Lọlọ Ede, which similarly recognizes agricultural excellence.

The Ezumezu and Lọlọ Ede titles are marks of both personal accomplishment and communal service. These women often become benefactors in their communities, supporting other women, organizing trade, and overseeing traditional ceremonies related to fertility and abundance.

03

The Duality of Igbo Society: Women's Titles vs. Men's Titles

Igbo society operates on a dual-leadership model where men and women hold parallel positions of power. Just as Eze Ede exists for women, men have corresponding titles such as:

These male titles recognize successful yam farmers, who are revered as providers and symbols of masculinity and strength. Yams are seen as the king of crops, with cultural and ritual significance, while cocoyams, though less celebrated, hold an equally vital place in women's domains.

The reverence for cocoyam farming among women highlights the

balanced structure of Igbo society, where both genders contribute to economic and spiritual life. By recognizing and honouring their agricultural achievements, Igbo communities ensure that women's labour and leadership are acknowledged and respected.



Cocoyam sold in market by Igbo woman.

The Eze Ede and related titles reflect the deeply ingrained respect for women's contributions to Igbo society. Through agricultural success, women gain power, prestige, and influence, ensuring their active participation in decision-making. These traditions signifies the egalitarian spirit of Igbo culture, where both men and women play complementary roles in sustaining their communities. The recognition of female agricultural leadership continues to be a powerful testament to the value of women's work in Igbo history and society.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chuka Odi

I'm a dedicated civil engineer with a passion for infrastructure development and community empowerment. With a strong background in engineering, my work focuses on creating sustainable solutions for urban and rural development projects. Outside of my professional career, I'm deeply interested in Igbo history and culture. I actively explore ways to impact society by using historical lessons to inspire and educate others about the rich cultural heritage of the Igbo people, aiming to bridge tradition and modern development.



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