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Gender and Kinship in Igbo Society: *The Role of Women in Patrilineal and Matrilineal Structures*

By Chuka Odike

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FEATURE
IMAGE

**The hairstyle for a new Igbo
?
mother, according to P. A. Talbot,
1926. Musée du quai Branly.**

Article image · caption retained from the published Ozikoro article

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In Igbo society, kinship is traditionally structured around both patrilineal and matrilineal systems, with distinct roles for men and women. Due to exogamy, the custom of marrying outside one's lineage women transition between lineages, which has led to cultural mechanisms that restrict their roles in ancestral veneration and land inheritance to protect the patriline (umunna). Practices such as breaking kola nuts and masquerading remain predominantly male responsibilities. Bride wealth negotiations also reflect this system, as they symbolize the transfer of a woman from one lineage (or "nation") to another, reinforcing the idea of lineage preservation.

Despite the dominance of the patriline, the matriline (umunne) remains essential in Igbo culture. It serves as a refuge for those who seek protection and plays a significant role in life events such as burials, childbirth, and conflict resolution. Women contribute to society in ways that are deeply valued, as reflected in names like Nneka ("mother is supreme") and Nnebuisi ("mother is life's strength"), emphasizing the reverence for maternal influence in Igbo social structures.

Women maintain strong ties with their natal families even after marriage, and terms such as nwanne (sibling) and umunne (maternal kin) highlight the importance of maternal lineage in fostering social cohesion. While societal norms often limit women's roles in patrilineal functions, their contributions to the matrilineal system ensure their continued influence in shaping Igbo cultural identity.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chuka Odike

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 explores 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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