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By Chukwunwike Ossai

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FEATURE
IMAGE

Alusi Ifejioku - The balance of femininity and masculinity of deities and shrines. Photograph by Daderot, 2012, CC0 1.0

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The Igbo people have a good political system, which they call a dual-sex system. In this system, men and women share power, but it does not mean one person is under the other. Instead, men and women have separate groups that do things, but still work together to ensure that society is balanced.

Women in Igbo societies do not just stay idle; they have a lot of power. They created groups like the women's court, the market committee, the secret society, and the age-grade group. In some Igbo communities, like Western Igbo, they choose women who have respect, money, and good character to become *Ọmụ*, like a queen for the women. In some towns, it is the royal family they select from. In contrast, others, like Ahaba and *Ọgwashi-Ukwu*, people who vote to select *Ọmụ*.

Before a woman can become *Ọmụ* in Onicha-Ugbo, she takes another prestigious title. Once she becomes *Ọmụ*, she starts dressing like a male king and gets a palace at her palace (even if she is married, she will move to her father's house, where they will build a palace for her). People who have taken titles, both men and women, greet her and give her respect. *Ọmụ* is in charge of the market and communicates with native doctors for serious issues, and they settle cases concerning women's bad behavior. Her assistants help her keep the market in order and ensure a peaceful community.



The Omu of Okpanam, photographed by Northcote Thomas in September 1912.

In Onicha mmili, *Ọmụ* and *Ada* (the first daughters in the family) have much power. They are the only women who can carry *Ọfọ* (staff of authority). They also created *Otu Ogene*, like the elders council for women, with the same level as the male council of chiefs. *Di Ọmụ* represents women in the king's palace and sometimes has the same power as the king (*Obi*). In *Ogwashi-Ukwu* and *Asaba*, *Ọmụ* is equal to the *Obi* or King. One *Ọmụ* from *Onitsha*, *Nwagboka*, signed a treaty with the British in 1884. *Ọmụ* and her council act as a strong political force. They can penalize anybody, man or woman, who misbehaves in the market or breaks tradition, such as adultery or incest. They attend community meetings with the king and chiefs and sometimes decide if the town goes to war. In *Oguta*, the *Otu Ogene* (women's council) is the biggest women's group, led by *Ogene Nwanye* (the most senior woman). In *Nnobi*, the *Ekwe* title women are close to *Idemili* goddesses and hold serious power. The head of their group, *Agba Ekwe*, is one of the most powerful women in the community.

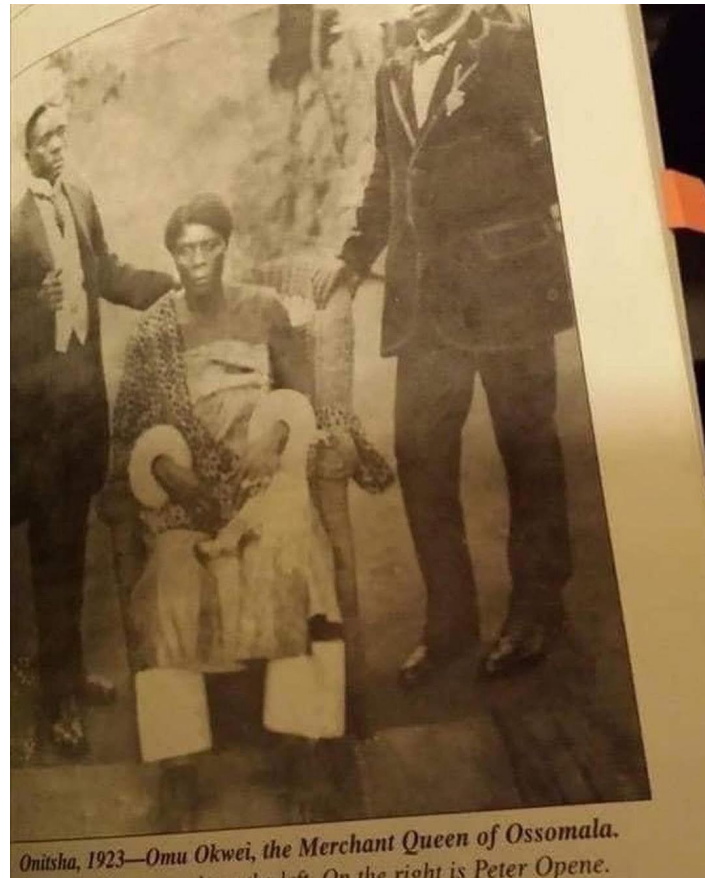
In *Arochukwu*, the *iyamba* women's group is usually used in the *Ekpe*

men's society. The woman who leads in each area judges cases and can use spiritual power to deal with people who do not obey. She can call all women to deal with any man or woman who does something bad. The group ensures the relationship between men and women is in order. Another powerful women's group is Otu Umuada or Otu Umuokpụ. This group is women who are the family's daughters; they can be married, single, or widows. They support their father's family and monitor their brothers' wives. Sometimes, they do act like male husbands to those wives. As "husbands," they do not perform sexual marital rites, but they attend family meetings, share land, and receive an inheritance. The same woman can be a wife on her husband's side and a husband on her father's side. It is called gender flexibility. So, even if the woman does not have power as a wife, she can have it as a daughter. The Umuada settles fights between family members, especially between husbands and wives. They act like the Supreme Court, making peace and purifying the community with rituals. During burial, they lead, conduct night vigils, and can possibly force elders to take action.



The Okpu mme or red cap of the present-day Omu of Okpanam. Photograph by George Agbo.

Otu Alutaradi, or Otu Inyemedi, is a group of married women with political power. They speak up for their rights and protect themselves. The oldest wives lead the group. In some towns, they decide when to plant or harvest and punish people who allow animals to eat women's crops. They sweep the village square, clean the market, and fetch water. Umuokpu and Alutaradi formed a strong body that balanced the power in the Igbo community. They are the checks and balances in society. Women also have power through age-grade groups. Like men, women form groups based on age and gain more power as they grow. The junior grade does small work, but the seniors make big decisions. For places like Ohafia, Afikpo, Arochukwu, Oguta, and Nsukka, women of age grades meet, raise money, help each other, and do community projects. Some groups like Ukeabua Ndi-Inyom for Ohafia even act like an executive and a court in the town.



Onitsha, 1923—Omu Okwei, the Merchant Queen of Ossomala. On the left is Peter Opene.

Omu Okwei of Osomari – The Igbo Merchant Queen

Women leaders settle cases of stealing and cheating and encourage other women to take the title. Women have their titles like Otu Ọdu (Ivory title) in Onitsha, Ogbuefi in Oguta, Lọlọanyi and Ogbunobodo in Nsukka, Ekwe in Nnobi, and Onwene in Onicha-Ugbo. Once a woman takes a title, she obtains much political and religious power. Some of them even enter men-only societies, touch masquerades, and break kola nuts, which normally is done by men. The dual-sex political system gives women space to speak on public matters and act as market women, wives, sisters, or spiritual people. Women use boycotts, strikes, fines, protests (like sitting or sleeping on top of a person who offends), and even denial of sex to push their demands. Sometimes, they even walk naked, run away from the community, or use force if need be. This system gives women real authority, voice, and control over society, just like men. They don't just talk; they act. Some of them have spiritual power that has seriously influenced the community.



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An enthusiast in tech with deep passion for studying and showcasing the vibrant cultural heritage of southern Nigeria . Combining my skill with my obsession towards African history and traditions to create contributions that impacts the digital space.



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