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Mazi Nwanyi: *Women in Arochukwu's Leadership and Culture*

By Chuka Odike

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FEATURE
IMAGE

**[Picture: Nwanyi Aro, Ibom,
Arochukwu, 1903. British Museum.]**

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MAZI NWANYI

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A woman from Arochukwu with an ornate hairstyle. Photographed by Northcote Thomas, 1912-13.

Arochukwu, a prominent cultural and historical city in Southeastern Nigeria, has long been known for its unique traditions and societal structures. Central to this heritage is the title “Mazi,” a term of deference typically reserved for male elders within the Aro communities, including Arochukwu, Arondizogu, and other Aro settlements. However, the title can also be applied to women in specific circumstances, reflecting the nuanced gender roles and respect accorded to influential individuals in Arochukwu society.

01

The Title “Mazi” and Gender Dynamics

Among the Aro people, “Mazi” is the most common deferential address for senior men. It is used for male elders, regardless of their specific status, provided they are independent socially and economically. Conversely, younger males who are still dependent on another person may be addressed as “Nwa Mazi” (son of Mazi), denoting their subordinate status.



"Hair-dressing as a Work of Art" "Charcoal dust and palm oil are freely used, but should necessity arise the structure must be cut away entirely, as it cannot be 'undone'." From G. T. Basden (1921). "Among the Ibos of Nigeria."

Interestingly, while "Mazi" is predominantly associated with men, there are two notable exceptions where it is extended to women. The first is when a woman has become significantly old and influential, commanding respect akin to that of male elders. The second is when a woman ascends to the highest position of authority, such as becoming the Eze Aro, the paramount ruler of the Aro people.

02

Women in Leadership: Eze Aro and Ezenwanyi Nnenne Mgbokwo Udo Omini Oke Nnachi

One remarkable example of female leadership in Arochukwu's history

is Ezenwanyi Nnemme Mgbokwo Udo Omini Oke Nnachi. A member of the prestigious Oke Nnachi clan, she was the fourth Eze Aro, serving as the paramount ruler of the Aro people between the late 17th and early 18th centuries. Her reign is a testament to the inclusivity of the Aro political and social system, which allowed exceptional women to rise to positions of significant influence.

[Picture: Nwanyi Aro, Ibom, Arochukwu, 1903. British Museum.] Ezenwanyi Nnemme Mgbokwo's leadership was not only symbolic but also practical, as she played a critical role in sustaining the cohesion of the Aro Confederacy during her time. Her title, "Ezenwanyi," meaning "queen" or "female king," underscores the respect and authority she commanded within a patriarchal society. Her legacy is an essential chapter in Arochukwu's history, highlighting the capacity of women to lead and influence at the highest levels.

03

Cultural Significance of Hairstyles and Representation

Women in Arochukwu have historically expressed their identity and status through elaborate hairstyles and adornments. A photograph taken by Northcote Thomas during his 1912-1913 ethnographic survey, now housed at the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (MAA) in Cambridge, captures a woman from Arochukwu with an ornate hairstyle. Such hairstyles were not mere aesthetics; they were symbols of identity, societal status, and sometimes personal achievements.



A woman from Arochukwu, early 20th century, a postcard via the US Library of Congress.

Another visual representation of Arochukwu women from the early 20th century exists in a postcard archived at the U.S. Library of Congress. These depictions offer a glimpse into the rich cultural tapestry of the Aro people and the roles women played within it.

04

Legacy and Modern Implications

The historical accounts of women like Ezenwanyi Nnemme Mgbokwo and the cultural practices of Arochukwu highlight the equality of gender and leadership in Igbo society. They challenge the notion of strictly patriarchal governance and offer a broader perspective on how societies adapt to recognize merit, influence, and service, irrespective of gender. The title “Mazi Nwanyi” (female Mazi) remains a symbolic acknowledgment of women’s roles in Aro culture, whether

as elders or leaders.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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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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