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Nwunye Di: *The Power of Marriage, Motherhood, and Matrilineal Influence in Igbo Societies*

By Idenze Ezeme

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FEATURE
IMAGE

Rich women of Onitsha South East Nigeria, wearing Ivory Anklets

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The Igbo people in southeastern Nigeria are known for their rich culture, which values family, community, and traditions. Women play a big role in Igbo society as wives (“Nwunye Di”), mothers, and keepers of matrilineal ties. “Nwunye Di” means “wife of the husband” or sometimes “co-wife” in families with more than one wife. It shows the strength, decision-making power, and importance of Igbo women. This article looks closely at these roles, explaining Igbo marriage customs, the respected place of mothers, and the ways women gain power through their matrilineal ties. It also talks about how things have changed over time.

Marriage in Igbo Society: A Family and Community Bond

Marriage, called “Igba Nkwu Nwanyi” or the wine-carrying ceremony, is a key part of Igbo culture. It brings together a man, a woman, their families, and even whole villages. Marriage is seen as the most important custom because it leads to having children, who keep the family name alive. Unlike Western marriages, which focus on the couple’s choice, Igbo marriage is a group effort. Families work together in special ceremonies to build strong connections between everyone.

Marriage starts with “Iku Aka,” which means knocking on the door. The groom, along with his dad, uncles, or other male family members, visits the bride’s family to say he wants to marry her. They bring gifts like kola nuts, palm wine, tobacco, and snuff to show respect and

kindness. The bride's father or another man from her family welcomes them, and they talk about the marriage plan, often sharing kola nuts and drinks.

If the bride's family says yes, the groom's family comes back for "Ime Ego," or bride price talks. The bride price, called "ego nwanyi," is a special gift to show how much the bride is valued and to thank her family for raising her. It might include money, yams, goats, or other items. Many families give back part of the bride price to show their daughter isn't being sold. The final step is the "Igba Nkwu," a big party where the bride shows she agrees to the marriage by giving the groom a cup of palm wine. This act means she chooses him. The celebration has lots of food, traditional dances, and a custom where people "spray" money on the couple to show happiness and wealth.

When a woman gets married, she becomes a "Nwunye Di," a title that means she has important duties and respect. In the past, many Igbo men had more than one wife, so "Nwunye Di" could also mean a co-wife. Co-wives help each other with tasks like taking care of children, farming, and selling goods at the market. This teamwork builds a strong bond, even though each wife has her own home and jobs to do, helping the whole family.

As a Nwunye Di, a woman joins the "Ndi Inyom," a group of married women in the community. This group gives women a say in village matters. They make rules for markets, plan festivals, and settle arguments, letting women have a big impact on culture and money matters. Being a Nwunye Di means balancing the job of helping her husband and family with having a strong voice in the community, where married women are seen as important leaders.

Motherhood: The Heart of Igbo Womanhood

Motherhood is the most special role for Igbo women, seen as the greatest part of being a woman. Having children is the main reason for marriage because kids keep the family line going. This idea shows up in everyday traditions, like the morning kola nut prayer, where

fathers ask for their children to have many kids and a good life. Mothers also pray to their “chi,” a personal spirit, during events like the New Yam Festival to ask for healthy children and happy marriages.

Igbo mothers are the main people who care for and teach their children. They show kids how to respect elders (“nkwanye ugwu”), work together with others, and follow Igbo traditions. They use stories, sayings, and hands-on lessons. Girls learn to cook, weave, and care for babies, while boys learn farming or other skills, often with their mother’s help.



A traditional hairstyle for a new Igbo mother, as documented by P. A. Talbot in 1926. Image from Musée du quai Branly.

Mothers also have spiritual jobs. They pray and make offerings to gods like Ala, the earth goddess, to keep their children safe and successful. This spiritual power makes mothers very important in the family, as they protect their kids’ bodies and hearts.

Being a mother has big challenges, especially the need to have boys to carry on the family name through the father's side. Women who only have girls or can't have children might be looked down on or left out. Sometimes, their husbands are pushed to marry another wife to have sons. To deal with this, some women adopt children or use a custom called "nrachi." In nrachi, a daughter stays with her parents and has children to keep her father's family line going, making sure the family gets inheritance rights.

Long ago, some women used woman-to-woman marriage. A woman with no children or whose husband died could marry another woman, who would have kids with a man to keep the family going. This gave the first woman money and respect. This custom is rare now because of Christian beliefs, but it shows how Igbo mothers found smart ways to meet cultural rules.

Matrilineal Influence: Giving Women Power

Most Igbo families pass down names and property through men, called a father-line system. But in places like Afikpo, Ohafia, and Abiriba, they use a matrilineal ties system called "ikwu." In this system, family connections go through the mother, so women can inherit land, property, and titles. This gives women and their kids money and safety, making matrilineal ties very important.

The "Ụmụada" is a strong group of women born in a community. Even after they marry and move away, they stay connected to their birth family through matrilineal ties. They help solve fights, keep peace, and make sure people follow traditions. The Ụmụada can fine or shun people who break rules, and they plan events like funerals and festivals. Their power is so big that even men, including village leaders, listen to them on issues like family fights or village problems.



Ụmụada Group. Photo: Dibia Nwangwu Uchendu

The Ụmụada shows that women had a lot of power in Igbo society long ago, especially before outsiders came. They help women stay close to their birth family while also doing their duties in their husband's family.

The mix of father-line and matrilineal ties creates a balance between men and women in Igbo society. Men have official titles like "Ozo" or "Eze," but women have power through groups like the Ụmụada and Ndi Inyom. This balance lets women make rules for markets, keep villages clean, and stand up for everyone's needs. It shows that Igbo women are not just followers but have a big say in running things and keeping culture alive.

Long ago, Igbo society had a system where men and women had their own groups to make decisions. Men had the Ụmụnna, and women had the Ụmụada and Otu Umuokpu. This let women handle their own matters and help decide things for the village. But when the British

ruled Nigeria from 1900 to 1960, they brought new rules that gave men more power and pushed women aside. Christian churches also changed things by pushing for one-wife families and smaller family groups, which didn't fit with Igbo ways of having many wives and big families.

Even with these changes, Igbo women fought back. In 1929, they led the Aba Women's War, a big protest against British taxes and unfair rules. This showed how strong and united Igbo women were, protecting their communities and leaving a story of courage.

Today, Igbo marriage and motherhood are different. Christianity and school education have made it less common for men to have many wives or for families to choose brides. Women now have more freedom to pick their husbands. Money problems and city life have also made one-wife families more common because they're easier to manage.

But old ideas still cause problems. Many think a woman's main job is to be a wife, which can limit her choices. Women who don't have children or only have girls might feel ashamed or face pressure. Some families use a custom called "nkuchi," where a widow marries her husband's brother to have kids for the family.

Igbo women are finding new ways to shine. They go to school, start businesses, and speak up for their rights. The Ndi Inyom works with groups to help women, and writers and thinkers push for fairness while keeping Igbo traditions alive. These efforts mix old and new ways, keeping women at the heart of Igbo culture.

"Nwunye Di" shows the amazing power of Igbo women as wives, mothers, and keepers of matrilineal ties. Through marriage, they build family connections and gain respect; as mothers, they raise and teach the next generation; and through matrilineal ties, they hold money and cultural power. Even with challenges from male-led systems, Igbo women show strength through groups like the *Ụmụada* and clever customs like *nrachi* and woman-to-woman marriage. This detailed story celebrates the lasting strength, wisdom, and work of Igbo

women, making sure their place in Igbo culture stays strong.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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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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