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The Role and Legacy of Ómù: *Traditional Female Leaders in Anioma Igbo Communities*

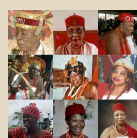
By Chuka Odike

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FEATURE
IMAGE

Notable Omu in Anioma.

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The Role and Legacy of Ómù: Traditional Female Leaders in Anioma Igbo Communities

By Chuka Odike · Cultural Heritage · Ozikoro.com

In Western Igbo towns (Anioma), traditional female leaders, known as Ómù, held significant authority alongside their male counterparts. This dual-sex leadership system, undermined by colonialism, ensured harmonious gender division of labour in Igbo politics.

In Western Igbo towns, particularly in Anioma communities, the Ómù (or Omu) represented an integral part of a dual-gender leadership structure where female authority complemented male governance. This arrangement created a balanced political system that allowed for the harmonious division of responsibilities across gender lines. The Ómù were highly respected and influential, playing critical roles in both political and economic realms within their communities.

Historically, the institution of Ómù empowered women by recognizing their leadership capabilities. Selected based on their character, wealth, and leadership qualities, the Ómù often led market women, a powerful socioeconomic group, with autonomy and authority. Dressed in regalia similar to that of male leaders and equipped with insignia, the Ómù were afforded high levels of respect and were considered an essential aspect of Igbo sociopolitical structure. They received homage from titled men and women, and they exercised influence not only over female community members but also, at times, over men.

In addition to being leaders, some Ómùs, particularly in Onitsha, held the Ofo (a staff of ritual authority), which symbolized spiritual and cultural power. This power solidified the role of Ómù as a bridge

between spiritual and secular governance in Igbo society.

- Obi Maria Ejima Obielua-Chizea (late Ómù of Asaba) - Obi Martha Dunkwu (late Omu Anioma and Okpanam) - Obi Chief (Dr.) Ada Nwanneamaka Biosah (Omu Asaba) - Azuka Muoekwunye (late Omu Issele-Azagba) - Phyllis Galembo (Omu Issele-Uku, 1994) - Clara Rafua-Doumbi Kinkel (Omu Ogwashi-Ukwu) - Anwuli Nkenchor (Omu Onicha-Ugbo) - Beatrice Onwordi (Omu Issele-Uku) - Theresa Uwadia (Omu Onicha-Uku)

- Selected for outstanding conduct, character, and ability (wealth) - Led market women with autonomy and authority - Dressed like male monarchs with insignia and palace - Received homage from titled men and women - Wielded influence over women and, at times, men

In Onitsha, Ómù and Ada held significant power, even holding the Ofo (staff of ritual authority).

Chuku, G. (2005). *Igbo Women and Economic Transformation in Southeastern Nigeria, 1900-1960*. Routledge

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chuka Odiike

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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