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Omu Okwei: *The First Woman to Drive a Car in Nigeria and a Queen of Trade*

By Idenze Ezeme

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FEATURE
IMAGE

Omu Okwei of Osomari - The Igbo Merchant Queen

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OMU OKWEI

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Omu Okwei of Ossomari – The Igbo Merchant Queen

Omu Okwei, called the Merchant Queen of Ossomari, is known as one of Nigeria's most successful businesswomen. She was the first woman to drive a car in Nigeria and a great trader and leader who changed history.

Okwei was born in 1872 in Ugolo, Ossomari, Anambra State. She was a member of a royal family. Her father, Prince Osuna Afubeho, was a fierce warrior and successful trader. Her mother, who belonged to a

wealthy family, instructed her in the art of trade. Daughters were not allowed to inherit their father's property during those days, so her mother ensured Okwei had the knowledge to provide for herself.

01

Starting Small in Trade

At the age of nine, Okwei was sent to her aunt in the Igala tribe to learn about business and the Igala language, which was important for trade. By 15, she returned home and began selling vegetables and poultry.

Okwei wed Joseph Allagoa, a brass trader, in 1889. Her family did not accept the marriage as Joseph was not from a royal line. They even retained her dowry, which was extremely important for women to establish their businesses. Unfazed, Okwei started trading palm oil utilizing her husband's business networks. Even when their marriage collapsed after a year, she kept building her trading connections.

Okwei wedded again in 1895 to Opene of Abo, son of a successful trader. Unlike her first husband, Opene fully endorsed her business ventures. They lived happily and were blessed with one son, Peter.



Onitsha, 1923-Omu Okwei, the Merchant Queen of Ossomala. Francis Allagoa stands on the left. On the right is Peter Opene.

02

Building a Business Empire

Okwei partnered with her second mother-in-law to assist in developing her business. She started dealing in commodities such as cotton and tobacco, which were in high demand. She became an agent for the Royal Niger Trading Company in 1904 and received approximately 400 tickets every month. The tickets were a form of exchange at the time because most of the Nigerians did not trust the British pound.

When World War I destroyed the palm oil business, Okwei adapted. She began selling ivory and coral beads, which were equally prized by Nigerians and Europeans. She also leased ceremonial ivory jewelry to earn additional money.

Okwei then became a money changer, exchanging the new British currency for the old money Nigerians trusted. She also became a landlord, owning 16 houses and renting out 15 of them. Importing goods directly from England made her richer.

03

A Respected Leader and Queen

Okwei's success made her a respected leader in her community. In 1912, she became the first Nigerian woman appointed to the British-Nigerian Native Court. She held this position for many years and passed it on to her eldest son, Francis.

Her efforts in the economy and at the municipal level led to her being anointed Omu, or Queen, of Ossomari in 1936. As Omu, she protected women, markets, and commerce in her ward. Her authority was so great that no one else has held this title since then.

04

A Legacy of Wealth and Influence

By the 1920s, Okwei was among the wealthiest women in Nigeria. She owned a car and chauffeur, trading boats, and lorries. She also had 24 houses, 25 plots of land, and £5,000 in the bank—a huge amount for those times.

Okwei's story is a testament to resilience, intelligence, and determination. She not only broke barriers in trade but also paved the way for women to take on leadership roles in Nigeria. As the first woman to drive a car in Nigeria, Omu Okwei remains an icon of empowerment and success.

This version simplifies the language while keeping all the essential details intact. Let me know if further tweaks are needed!



A marble statue was erected in her memory to honor her legacy, and a street in Onitsha was named after her.

05

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Idenze Ezeme

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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