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The Impact Of Western Influence On Igbo Women Leadership: *Story Of Marginalization and Strong Head*

By Chukwunwike Ossai

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FEATURE
IMAGE

**Omu of Obior, HRH Omu
Onyebuchie Okonkwo.**

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The Impact Of Western Influence On Igbo Women Leadership: Story Of Marginalization and Strong Head

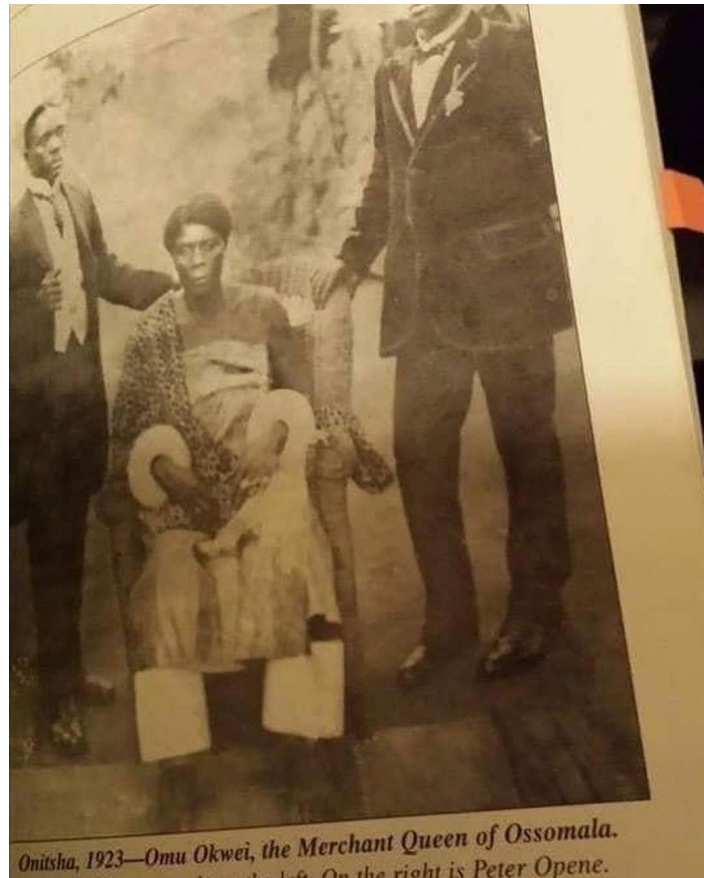
By Chukwunwike Ossai · Cultural Heritage · Ozikoro.com

The Igbo people in southern Nigeria are known for their good and balanced ways of governance. This gives both men and women correct roles in society. Before colonization by the whites, the Igbo land had always operated a dual-sex system, which means both men and women shared power very well. Women are not backbenchers; they hold serious power in government matters, businesses, spirituality, and even court cases.

But when the colonial people came in the late 1800s and early 1900s, they scattered the arrangement. They removed women from positions of different powers and placed them under men, just like how their land operates.

This article provides details on how colonialism took leadership away from Igbo women, how they fought back, and how some continue to strive to address these problems to date.

Before the Europeans came, Igbo people had a system that balanced power between men and women. It is called a Dual-Sex political system. Women don't just sit and look. They lead as well. One strong position is Omu- one who leads all the women's affairs, from market problems to spiritual things.



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

Omu Okwei of Osomari – The Igbo Merchant Queen

~ Omu is not an assistant to the king (Obi or Eze); she is a leader in her own right. She handles women's court, market business and traditional rites. Women's courts are separated from men's courts, so women's problems are settled fairly. Women also rule in the market – they pilot the affairs and even have a market shrine to perform their spiritual rituals.

Women are very strong spiritually. Omu is the king's spiritual advisor. Igbo culture respects the spirit of Women, and believes that the spirit of a woman protects the land and gives prosperity. Therefore, Women are not liabilities; they are very important in every corner of Igbo life.



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

When the white arrived: How they scattered the power of women.

When European traders and colonial masters arrived, everything changed. The white do not agree or understand the Igbo dual-sex system. They came from a place where only men are permitted to lead, like the Christian religion, as portrayed in the bible. So they took away powers from women in every single position.

For example, in 1884, Omu Nwagboka Egwutatu of Onitsha, a strong trader and leader, signed a treaty with the British. But as time went on, the British people began to choose only men to represent their communities because they felt that men could be easily controlled. Women who are strong-headed, even in the market, began to be pushed aside.



Omu Nwagboka Egwuatatu of Onicha

By 1914, the British had already eroded women's authority through their laws. They went so far as to exclude their traditional court and village meetings, then replace them with a court that only men could rule. Even the position of Omu was taken over by men. Everything that belongs to women, including commerce, land, leadership, and so on, was moved and given to men.

Even the educational system favours just boys. Women then took on house chores because Christian missionaries preached that a woman's place was at home. They used the Bible to preach that women cannot lead.

This didn't just occur in Igbo land. In Africa all over, the Colonial masters took over everything and threw the women's authority away. All the places where women ruled before —like Queen Mothers, Priestesses, and council Women—were wiped out. They changed the law, land, ownership, and school to favour only men. This was how

gender inequality started. They displayed a whole lot across Africa.

Igbo Women Refused- The Aba Women Riot and Others.

Even with all these oppressions, Igbo women did not give up by doing nothing. They organized strikes, boycotts, and protests to fight back. One big way everybody knew was the Aba Women's Riot of 1929. It started because they wanted to tax women and reduce their business powers. Thousands of women came out protesting, even when the colonial people fought back. This riot portrays the voice and spirit of women.

Women did not stop there. They still fought just to bring back the original dual-leadership system. This fight gave rise to leaders like Omu Martha and Omu Anioma, who revived traditional ways.



Meet Her Royal Majesty, Obi Martha Dunkwu, Omu Anioma/Nneoha.

Even now, so many of the things that colonialism had caused are still in existence. Many of our strong institutions, where women pilot their



affairs, such as the women's court and market leadership, no longer exist. Men dominated everything. Just like Omu Anioma said, "Men only think one way, but women think from many sides." In other words, when women's leadership is excluded, many things that need a woman's touch would be missing.

What We Can Do Now: Bringing Back What Is Lost.

To make things better again, the Igbo society needs to do the following: 1. Bring back Women's Leadership: Reviving women's courts and community councils so they can address community matters. 2. Supporting Women in Business: Helping women gain access to land, credit, and market rights again. 3. Respect Women's Spiritual Role: Let women reclaim their spiritual position and respect the feminine energy in tradition. 4. Educate Girls Well: Ensure that girls attend school to acquire an education so that they can become the leaders of tomorrow. 5. Tell Their Stories: Write and share stories of strong women leaders, like Omu Nwagboka, so young girls can recognize that they, too, can lead.



Notable Omu in Anioma.

Western influence really changed the Igbo society, especially for women. Colonial rule abolished the system that had given men and women a chance to lead again. But Igbo women refused to lose everything. From the Aba Women's Riot to the revival of Omu, they continued to fight to reclaim what was lost.

If the Igbo Society is to be truly balanced again, we must recognize women's leadership again. As HRH Omu Onyebuchi Okonkwo said, "The strength of Igbo leadership lies in when men and women work together, side by side."

Let us stand up to rebuild what the colonizers scattered. It is only when we unite that we can enjoy peace, justice and true prosperity.



This article is to honor all the Igbo women who refused to stay calm and continue to strive for justice and fairness to this day.

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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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