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The Otu Odu Society of Onicha: *Guardians of Tradition and Prestige*

By Chuka Odike

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These women are likely part of the Ndị Odu or Otu Odu society which is a women's socio-political and economic organisation in Onicha (Onitsha) made up of wealthy members who either bought the rights to the title or whose relatives bought the rights to either wear odu aka, ivory bracelets, or odu ukwū, ivory anklets, or both

In the vibrant cultural tapestry of Onitsha, the Otu Odu Society stands as a testament to the enduring influence and prestige of women in Igbo society. Historically, this esteemed organization has been composed of affluent women who either acquired the rights to the Odu title themselves or had these rights purchased by their relatives. The title grants the privilege of adorning ivory bracelets (Odu Aka), ivory anklets (Odu Ukwu), or both, symbolizing their elevated status within the community.

Before the 1890s, the Omu of Onitsha, the female counterpart to the Obi (the town's paramount leader), wielded significant authority over women's affairs and the Otu Odu Society. The last known Omu, Nwagboka, who reigned from 1834 to 1890, was not only a political figure but also the head of commerce and trade. Initially resistant to Christianity, Omu Nwagboka later became instrumental in encouraging women to attend church services, leading to increased participation among influential female members of the Anglican mission.

Omu Nwagboka was initially a traditional practitioner before converting to Christianity, at least, formally. Her change in attitude to

the religion may have been due to pressure from missionaries and her European trade partners who worked as two arms of European imperialism in the area, traders later becoming invaders and subsequently forming a colonial government.

Pressure to convert also came from their children trained in mission schools; although older generations may have been resistant towards conversion, the mission school attenders eventually came to take the position at the top of society in politics, in the courts, and in what was termed *orụ* or *olụ bekee* or *orụ oyibo*, civil service and other jobs introduced by the British Empire that formed a decade after the last *Ọmụ Onicha*.

The Otu Odu Society has evolved over time. Originally a private organization for women of character and affluence, it has transformed into a prestigious society with modernized rules and functions. Membership remains a symbol of respect and elevated social standing, reflecting a woman's significant contributions to her community.

Despite the cessation of appointing an Omu in Onitsha for over a century, the Otu Odu Society continues to play a prominent role in the socio-political and economic spheres of the community. Its members, distinguished by their ivory ornaments, uphold traditions that have been passed down through generations, ensuring the preservation and celebration of Onitsha's rich cultural heritage.

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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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