



Ozi Ikòrò

AFRICAN HISTORY · CULTURE · INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE

CULTURAL HERITAGE

The Pivotal Role of Nnewi Women in African Historiography Since the 20th Century

By Chukwunwike Ossai

Ozikoro.com · Cultural Heritage · 6 min read

FEATURE
IMAGE

NO FEATURED IMAGE IN THE RECORD

The article carries no featured image, so this panel is left as an honest empty space rather than filled with one.

Ozi Ikòrò

THE PIVOTAL ROLE OF NNEWI WOMEN IN AFRICAN HISTORIOGRAPHY SINCE THE 20TH

The Pivotal Role of Nnewi Women in African Historiography Since the 20th Century

By Chukwunwike Ossai · Cultural Heritage · Ozikoro.com

In the lively town of Nnewi, Anambra State, Nigeria, market women played a very big role in the history of Africa since the 20th century. Through their strong hand in businesses, politics, and culture, they have challenged people's thoughts about what women are capable of doing or not. These women have proven that they are not people who are just there to look, but real actors who will push the economy, fight for justice, and keep their culture alive. Even if they face challenges like poor access to school and money, Nnewi market women have left a strong mark in African historiography, and they have helped push for a better and more balanced story of the African past.

Economic Contributions: Driving Growth and Challenging Stereotypes
Nnewi market is one of the biggest in West Africa, and it is where women control serious business. They sell food, clothes, spare parts, electronics, building materials, and even small manufacturing products. One example is the Ukamaka Okoye, which has EMCO Foundry Works. She produces car battery terminals and parts for motorcycles. Her business gives work to youths and shows that women create jobs and bring new ideas.

They are also involved in major trade across Africa and even outside, breaking the idea that only men can run a trade. They know price negotiation and market competition very well, and they have pushed the economy forward. Market women at Nnewi also have their own money system—like daily or weekly thrift contribution (ajo)—that



helps them save and borrow money among themselves without going to the bank. This type of method shows that African women cannot depend on foreign systems to survive.

But they still face challenges, like a lack of capital, low education, and limited control over resources. These things literally stopped some of them from growing their businesses well. Still, what they have done in the economy shows that women matter very much in development, and this has changed the old belief that women are not involved in the economy.

Political Activism: Advocating for Change Nnewi market women are not just selling; they know how to fight for justice, too. In the 1920s and 1930s, they protested and joined hands with others to challenge colonial rule. They joined the famous Aba Women's Riot and protested against bad colonial policies like taxes and falling produce prices. Even during the Great Depression, they never kept quiet.

Even today, they are still protesting and speaking up. For example, in September 2018, over 1,000 women in Agboedo United Market, led by Mrs. Martha Mbonu, protested against alleged cheating by the market chairman. They shut down towns with peaceful protests and showed that they had the power to influence government matters. They are also involved in politics, like supporting candidates, attending court, and protesting election cheating during the 2003 governorship election in Anambra.

These actions show that women can take part in public life, not just men. The Nnewi Market Women's Union is a strong group that helps women speak up, promote community development, and push for gender equality. Historians now rethink how they will discuss politics in Africa because these women have shown that grassroots activism is real power.

Socio-Cultural Contributions: Preserving Heritage Nnewi market women also help to protect African culture. They pass history through their mouths, telling stories, teaching customs, and keeping



traditional ways alive. This oral tradition helps us understand African life better and corrects the idea that only men build society.

Names like “Nneka” (Mother is supreme), “Nneamaka” (Mother is beautiful), and “Nnebuugwu” (Motherhood is honour) show how the Igbo people respect women and motherhood. Nnewi market women now help push cultural knowledge forward and lead some cultural practices. This has helped change how historians see history—now, they normally include the voice of women in the story.

Their work also inspired historians to start using new ways to study history that go beyond the written book. They showed that African history isn’t complete if we don’t hear from women. By keeping their culture alive, they also helped decolonise how people write and teach their African history.

Challenges in Historiography Even with all their works, Nnewi market women still had plenty of challenges in how they appear in the book of history:

1. **Poor Educational Background:** Most people did not attend school very well, so they didn’t write their own stories. Historians used only books to miss their voices.
2. **Lack of Sources:** Most historical records focus on what men do. Many stories about women no longer exist or are no longer found, so we depend on oral stories.
3. **Eurocentric Views:** History written by Western people left African women out. They don’t see African women as agents of change. But scholars like M.K. Asante push Afrocentric ways that place African women in the middle.
4. **Dominance of Male Perspectives:** Many books discuss only men in public life. The full picture isn’t complete if they don’t include women who make things happen in the background.
5. **Erasure of Women’s Experiences:** The role of Women in pre-colonial Africa is not really found in the history book. This makes their story unfounded and their history incomplete.

Even the oral stories we depend on have problems—people can forget, change stories or add emotion. Scholars like Leopold von Ranke said



that history is supposed to be neutral and based on fact. So, historians would need to balance all these sources well to get a true story.

The Path Forward To carry the Nnewi market women loaded in history, some things need to be done:

1. Give them better access to education and literacy so they can tell their stories independently. 2. Historians are supposed to find new ways to record women's voices using oral stories, local records, newspaper records, and market union records. 3. Let us use Afrocentric and feminist methods to study history, which will show African women as key players. 4. Historians are supposed to balance stories, not just take one angle, and let the final story be accurate and fair.

Nnewi market women have played a strong role in African history since the 20th century. They broke gender stereotypes and made better contributions to our understanding of the past. From business to politics to culture, they have proven that women are not in the background—they are on the frontline. Even with low school level, small recognition, and foreign bias in history, these women still inspire a better and more complete view of Africa. As we began to include their voice in books, research and teachings, African history would be complete, and the strong work of Nnewi market women will shine all over the world.

- Amadiume Ifi. *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society*. Zed Books, 1987.
- Oyěwùmí Oyèrónkẹ. *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*. University of Minnesota Press, 1997.
- Asante Molefi Kete. *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change. African American Images*, 2003.
- Chinyere Phillis & Chikwendu Chinyere. *The Role of Nnewi Market Women in the Development of African Historiography Since the 20th Century*. *The Journal of Development Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 132–150, February 2024.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chukwunwike Ossai

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.



Ozi Ikòrò

History worth reading.

African history · culture · indigenous knowledge
