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Women and Ofo in Igbo Tradition: *Bridging Spiritual Authority*

By Chuka Odike

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FEATURE
IMAGE

The colourized version of a titled Igbo woman wearing ivory leglets, bracelets, and locally woven cloth in Nsuka area by Chuka Odike, 2025. Original Photo: K.C. Murray, ca. 1940.

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A titled woman wearing ivory leglets, bracelets, and locally woven cloth in Nsuka area. Photo: K.C. Murray, ca. 1940.

In Igbo tradition, the Ofo is a sacred symbol representing a connection to ancestors and the spiritual world. It signifies authority, justice, and morality. Traditionally, the Ofo is primarily associated with men, particularly lineage heads and elders. These men wield it in rituals, symbolizing their role as spiritual leaders. Some Ofo symbols, like the Ofo-Ataka in Nnewi, are so sacred that women cannot handle or even see them.

The Nsukka woman, adorned in traditional attire, holds a sacred Ofo twig in her right hand, its black hue symbolizing spiritual authority and ancestral connection.



The colourized version of a titled Igbo woman wearing ivory leglets, bracelets, and locally woven cloth in Nsuka area by Chuka Odike, 2025. Original Photo: K.C. Murray, ca. 1940.

However, the role of women in the Igbo spiritual realm is more nuanced. Women who serve as ritual experts, such as diviners and native doctors use smaller versions of the Ofo, known as Ofo-Nkiti. Married women, especially elder women from groups like the Umu-Ada or Umu-Okpu, Otu-Odu also keep Ofo twigs for specific



purposes, including dispute resolution and ceremonies. Some women keep their Ofo at their personal Chi shrine or carry it with them. This practice highlights women's significant spiritual and societal roles within Igbo culture.

Ejizu, C. I. (1986). Ofo: Igbo Ritual Symbol.

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 explores 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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