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Women in the Igbo Culture: Extrapolations from Nsukka, South-Eastern Nigeria

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Abstract

The study documents all the key aspects through which the cultural representation of the Nsukka town women is constructed. It seeks to investigate women's involvement and participation in the cultural enactment of festivals, title-taking ceremonies, burials and funerals, marriage ceremonies, postpartum care, and conflict resolution, relying on materials from literature, ethnographic data, studies involving participant observation, and interview sessions with natives possessing a sufficient knowledge of culture and tradition. Data collected were examined using historical descriptive and analytical methods and the study is anchored in Jones Lewis's theory of feminism which, among other criticisms, questions how much of our culture is based on patriarchal assumptions. The study found that even though women are subjugated in certain aspects of life, their involvement and participation in the enactments of cultural events and conflict management in Nsukka town give them some sense of belonging and that, without their involvement, such cultural and traditional events would not take place and their essence would be lost. These counter claim that men are often considered the drivers of cultural activities and as such belong to the public domain while women are confined purely to private life and domestic activities. The study is helpful in understanding the implications of women's involvement and participation in the enactments of culture and tradition in Nsukka town.

Key words

women, culture, enactments, participation, extrapolations, Nsukka

Introduction

The first indigenous University of Nigeria, founded by the first President of Nigeria, Nnamdi Azikiwe, in 1955 and formally opened on October 7, 1960, is located in Nsukka town, thereby making it a hive of academic activities, leading to much research and remarkable findings. One such was the archaeological ex-

cavations carried out by Hartle in the University of Nigeria Nsukka farm site which yielded pottery dated to about 2,500B.C. This is the earliest known site in Igboland (Hartle, 1980). This proves beyond any reasonable doubt that Nsukka town was inhabited by the ancient people of Igboland, as the findings clearly show that human activities were already present at about 3,000 B.C. (Chikwendu, 2002). Geographically, Nsukka town is situated in the northern part of Igboland, which shares frontiers with Ọba Uduleke and Eha Alumona in the east, Edem Ekeodobo and Alor Ụlọ in the west, Ọbụkpa Asadụ in the north, and Ede Ọballa Nome, Obimo Asebere, and Ikwọka Ezembịa in the south.

The definition of women as the "weaker sex" appears to be an extremely narrow perception or point of view based on the average man's physical size and strength compared to the average woman. However, despite all evidence to the contrary, women continue to be referred to (and treated) as the "weaker sex" (Leake, 2019). It is common knowledge and regularly noted that in some spheres of life, women are still subjugated. For example, in Igboland, of which Nsukka is a part, women are not allowed to take part in certain activities such as village or town hall meetings where deliberations pertaining to the wellbeing of the local people are discussed. This makes women rely on their husbands for relevant information. They "depend on men for confirmation of their thoughts and actions" (Emeka-Nwobia & Ndimele, 2019, p. 162). Women are usually excluded from some sensitive matters because of their alleged flippant nature and inability to keep secrets. They are also not allowed to eat certain things. Corroborating this, Nwokoye and Chikwere (2014) write, "Women have been exempted [*sic*] from doing certain things with regards to the tradition of the land. Some of these things include eating some kind of food like egg, gizzard and the tail of fowl. They are also forbidden from performing certain roles which might be regarded as exclusive of the men folk [sic]" (p. 67). The female zone of functions, on the other hand, restricts women to the kitchen, cradle, and the female economic sphere, mostly perceived as demeaning for men to venture or intrude into. These socially ascribed functions inhibit woman's participation in public life, since they are to be seen but not heard (Nwoko, 2012).

In spite of this, there are areas in the domain of culture and tradition where women are not excluded and the roles women play in such areas in Nsukka town give them some sense of belonging. Examples of such participatory roles are seen during the *Onunu* festival, title-taking, burial, funeral, and marriage ceremonies, postpartum care, and conflict resolution. In these roles, they sustain cultural heritages and contribute immensely toward keeping them alive in the face of neo-reli-

gious intolerance. Certainly, without them, these events could not take place.

Several studies (Agujiobi, 2020; Chuku, 2007; Ojukwu & Ibekwe, 2020; Opata, 2020; Ugwu, Iorfa, Ogba, Effiong, & Ugwa, 2018) have been carried out on Igbo women. They dwell on domestic violence, the restrictions imposed on women, and their subjugation, but none of them highlight the issue of women in cultural events and the key role they play, especially in Nsukka town. To address this issue, this study examines aspects of the overall context of women's participation in day-to-day life, but particularly in the context of their participation in cultural events in Nsukka town.

The study was driven by research questions such as: 1) In what ways do women contribute to the overall enactment of the *Nkwọ Onunu* festival? 2) What roles do they play during burial and funeral ceremonies in Nsukka? 3) How is the *Ụmụada* (Council of Married Daughters, within or outside the community) the custodian of justice and conflict management? 4) What roles do women play in both title-taking ceremonies and the *Ọmabe* festival? and 5) What are their roles in traditional marriages and postpartum care? (see additional examples in Appendix 1). These questions form the basis on which the study anchors itself in trying to achieve an understanding of the implications of women's involvement and participation in Nsukka cultural and traditional activities.

The Theory of Feminism

This study takes its research direction from the feminism theory of Jones Lewis (2020) which emphasizes the patriarchal roots of inequality between men and women, or, more specifically, the social domination of women by men. She views patriarchy as dividing societal rights, privileges, and power primarily along the lines of sex, resulting in the oppression of women and the privileging of men. This is not surprising as, in Nsukka, women are derogatorily referred to as *ndiom atụ ọhụ*. For clarity, *ndiom* is women, *atụ* is vagina and *ọhụ* is buttock. So, it is a way of making negative remark on women, referring to their vagina, which they say is located in their buttock. This alludes to them being the weaker sex and sex objects, regarded as being only good for raising children, doing household chores, and helping with farm work. This ignores the fact that they are the backbone of many cultural activities in Nsukka town, without which neither tangible nor intangible cultural heritage would exist and justice might not be served, especially in relation to the *Ụmụada* and its exercise of authority in managing conflicts. This theme will be further developed later in the text.

Method

Both primary and secondary sources of information were used. The primary sources were oral information extracted from local people, five men and five women from Nkpunano, Nru, and Ihe na Owere Nsukka (the three main areas of Nsukka town) who are knowledgeable about cultural and traditional matters. Each of them was asked specific questions based on their wide knowledge of the subject matter and their involvement and participation in cultural activities relevant to the study area. The interviews took place over a relatively long period of time, from 2015 to 2020. Specific deep insights that have a direct bearing on the subject of inquiry are cited in the study.

Secondary data sources (journal articles, books, unpublished postgraduate theses, and online resources) were examined to identify lacunae in the literature on the subject matter and for comparative analysis. Photographs taken during the field work were included to flesh out the narratives and enrich and enhance the readers' engagement with the paper. For the illumination of data so collected, historical descriptive and analytical approaches were employed.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study clearly show that the *Ndishi/Akpruarua* (Council of Elders), *Ndoha* (Council of Titled Men), *Nzemaa* (Council of Maskers), *Ndigwe* (Council of Traditional rulers), and *Umuada* (Council of Married Daughters, within or outside the community) are in charge of Nsukka's cultural and traditional affairs. The only aspect in which women are relegated to the background is the *Omabe* masking tradition which is shrouded in secrecy and therefore reserved exclusively to men. Despite this, even here women play essential roles in its enactment. They sew the masquerade costumes, provide their lengths of cloth or "wrappers" as part of the *Ishimaa* and *Ediogbene* costumes, and buy mats that are used by the initiates for sitting down in the *Omabe's* house, the *Ulomaa.*[1] Also, during the *Onunu* festival in honor of the *Nkwo* mother goddess of the Nsukka people, women's roles cannot be overemphasized. Women sing songs anchored in folklore on the eve of title-taking ceremonies. They make the decisions regarding the burial of dead women and take part in deciding on the acceptance of marriage

[1] These are usually rectangular in shape with two entrance doors and two windows behind, covered with fresh plumes of palm frond. Women sweep the village squares where they are built.

proposals for their young women by suitors. Postpartum care remains their exclusive preserve. Through the bestowment of the *Orinechi* title, the funerals of women deemed worthy are celebrated during their lifetime as a mark of deepest respect and honor. The title of *Onyishi Ndiom* is bestowed on the eldest of the married women and all the rights, privileges, and shares accruing from her office are given to her. The *Ụmụada* are the custodians of culture and tradition and also managers of conflicts, involving themselves in matters of concern and adjudicating on them to bring lasting solutions.

Women in the Enactment of the *Nkwọ Onunu* Festival

> In most African society, some restrictions exist that manifest themselves in the form of taboos, laws on the use of public spaces, land use, and the exploitation and management of resources which on the surface appear to be targeted at women. However, when their origin, essence and dynamics within specific cultures are subjected to critical interrogation, a new picture emerges. What was assumed to be legal apparatus deliberately devised by men to sideline women turns out to be respect for women and the ontological forces in the polity (Opata, 2020, p. 25).

Women play pivotal roles in the *Nkwọ Onunu* festival which occurs annually in the month of January and is celebrated in reverence of the mother goddess, *Idenyi Nkwọ*, known also as *Nemụrụ Ọha* (the mother, who bore all) by the indigenous people of Nsukka at a particular landmark known as the *Ugwu-nkwọ* (an arena of historical importance). As a festival of intangible heritage, it empowers and provides them with the opportunity to make supplications to the mother goddess for blessings and for the betterment of the local people with the aim of achieving success in life. To carry out this, during the morning hours of the *Nkwọ Onunu* festival day, they gather in the *Nkwọ* shrine square with *ọkpa*,[2] *odo*,[3] and palm oil to pour libations, make supplications, and appease the goddess. In the evening, before the *Igba echi* (the ritual of placing metal rings around the ankles of young women) is performed, local women cosmeticians whose duty it is to make up and adorn the young women are contracted. They inscribe the young women's shoulders and

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[2] A native food made by mixing together Bambara nut powder, palm oil, pepper, and salt, wrapping it in banana leaves to form cake, and cooking it.

[3] This is talcum powder used to make incantations. It is said that whatever *odo* (*Dracaena arborea*) has touched becomes peaceful.

upper chests with the *uli* design. For a better understanding of *uli*, Ikwuemesi (2011) writes thus:

> *Uli* is the Igbo name for the indigo dye obtained from several species of plants identified with the following botanical names: *Rothmania whitfieldi*, *Rothmania hispolie*, *Rothmania cuspica*, and *Rothmania urcelli*. Usually, the berries of these plants are extracted and ground and the dye is pressed out of the mash with the finger of the hand. Once extracted, it is ready and a workable medium for drawing on the human body. Usually, the dye is placed in a wooden receptacle or coconut shell from where the artist scoops it with the help of the *uli* knife (*mmanw'uli*) to make the intricate monochromatic drawing on the body (p. 5).

After the *uli* body adornment, the young women tie pieces of cloth over their breasts and around their waists. They also tie *jịgda* (a string of beads) around their waists. In the olden days, this was used in Igboland to cover sexually mature women's nakedness before the introduction of clothing. They also wear ivory hand bands and metal rings (*echi*) around their wrists and calves respectively. According to Urama (2017), "the accouterments of the maidens give aesthetic value to their performance. They wear attires that distinguish them from the rest of the people (p. 112)." In the company of their parents, friends, and well-wishers, they all move toward the *Nkwọ Onunu* festival arena. The movement is usually rowdy; women bards (*Ọkwa egara*) as repositories of oral tradition imaginatively recite proverbs, idioms, and anecdotes of great philosophical import in a profound manner to encourage and energize them. When they enter the arena, the young women perform a medley of dance steps, showcasing themselves to the crowd composed of local people and visitors, who gather to behold the event. The purpose of the dance steps is to show that their bodies have become an agency for creative activities or performances. As a way of showing solidarity, people usually throw money at them.

During the 2019 *Nkwọ Onunu* festival enactment, a young woman performed the *ịgba echi* rituals in the company of her mother and relatives, wearing an orange beaded cap and necklace. She was holding animal hairs attached to a stick, called a *nza*. Her breasts were covered with a brace band and she wore colored beads (*jịgda*) around her waist. Metal rings (*echi*) adorned her legs, specifically around her calves (see Figure 1). Her scintillating subtle rhythmic movement was like a model waking on a runway with calculated, measured steps. She was holding and raising the *nza* during this process, which made the audience happy and spurred empathic

Figure 1. A young woman wearing the metal rings (*echi*) on her calves,with her mother and relatives for the *igba ichi* ritual, 2019. Photo: The author.

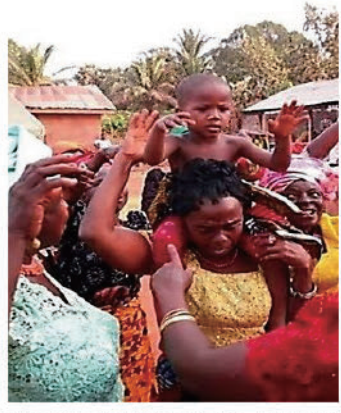

Figure 2. A little girl being carried shoulder-high for the *Oromee* ritual, 2019. Photo: The author.

bodily responses in them. Her exquisite and conspicuous beauty was admired by everybody in and around the arena. At the end, she performed to the delight of the crowd in the arena and, in their excitement; they expressed their appreciation by throwing money at her, which one of her relatives gathered up.

Immediately after the young woman had finished the *igba echi* performance in the *Nkwọ* arena, another ritual followed. A little girl was carried in on the shoulders of a woman and she was accompanied by other women (Figure 2) to where a

Figure 3. A little girl with a leaf she plucked for the *Oromee* ritual, 2019. Photo: The author.

band of men from Amankwo were playing *igede-nkwọ* music basket rattles, wooden gong and metal gong under an *iroko* tree in the arena. During the process, the little girl waved her hands in time with the song that the women were singing:

> *Kele kele korikodo, jide n nwa madụ ne nwa madu jih ada!*
> (Hold somebody's child firmly, else she will fall on the ground!),
> *Oro omeeooo, ta bu Nkwọ! Nkwọ lọọlọ anyị, aeeeeeee! aeeeeeee!!*
> (*Oro omeeooo*, today is Nkwọ! Our virtuous mother, Nkwọ, aeeeeeee!).

While still carrying her on their shoulders, the women danced together to the music of the *igede-nkwọ* band and then moved to the totem tree under which libations and supplications are poured to the *Nkwọ* deity. The little girl plucked a leaf (Figure 3) and placed it between her lips. This act completed the *ivu oromee* ritual as well as the *Onunu* festival, demonstrating how the performing arts can be used as a means of gender negotiation as well as a medium for encouraging social change. In this way, gender roles are enacted in performance (Ozah, 2008). The mother of the little girl, Nkwọ Agbo (personal communication, June 20, 2017), counting the blessings associated with performing in the *oromee* ritual, informed the author that "little girls who have undergone the *oromee* rituals, no doubt, will get married to well-to-do husbands in due time and they will beget male and female children via normal and safe delivery. They will become a source of blessing to their households. This is the main essence of embarking on the ritual."

The Roles of Women in Burial and Funeral Ceremonies

Women play paramount roles during burial and funeral ceremonies in Nsukka. When an adult male or female dies, it is incumbent on women to perform *mmachi enya*, the laying out of the corpse, after which they watch over it so that rats will not pluck out its eyes. While watching the corpse as it lies on the bed, they sing dirges until the evening of the next day, when they dress up the deceased in their best clothes in preparation for burial. If the deceased is a woman, all her clothes would be hung on the walls of her room. Ugwu (personal communication, January 12, 2015) informed the author that the reason behind the display is to show that she was adequately taken care of by her children while alive, because some unscrupulous children are known to abandon their mothers, tagging them as witches. Bearing this in mind, most women inspect these clothes to see if they are satisfactory, and on the contrary they will immediately stage a walk-out and disperse. This means that the dead will not be buried until clothes are bought and displayed and a certain amount of money must also be paid as a fine. Afraid of facing such consequences, children take proper and adequate care of their mothers while they are alive.

Before burial, gunshots are fired into the air. Amidst wailing, the children of the deceased woman take turns to collect sand with a hoe and pour it into the grave saying, *Mama ladoo* (fare thee well, mother) and *Nnebụrụ igwe anyị ja akpụ a n'ụzụ* (If mother were to be metal we would go to the smith and forge her).

To remind the locals within and around the village of the *manya tebru* rite for the deceased, a gunshot is fired in the air early on the morning of the next day. The local people converge on the family compound for this important rite. There is a saying, *anyụkọ nwamunyi ọnụ, ọgbọ ụhụhụ*, which according to Aniakor (1995) means "the collective foam that pierces the earth with its liquid thrust when many people urinate together" (p. 5). This is an allusion to the conviviality that exists when people come together of one accord to carry out a task. Broken down for easy comprehension, *manya* is wine and *tebru* is a corrupt form of the word for "table." For the performance of the *manya tebru* burial rite, a table is kept in the family compound of the deceased with a register for recording the names of local people who show solidarity at this time by contributing money. This money is used to buy gallons of palm wine. After lunch called *ekwor eka n'nri eshushue* in Nsukka, married women, together with married daughters, come from their respective husband's places and gather in the deceased family compound. Each must bring a plate of food of her choice, which is served. After eating, palm wine is

served for everybody's enjoyment.

After the *manya tebru* rite, the bereaved family and in-laws observe twelve days of mourning in the family compound of the deceased. During this period, every married woman outside the family provides a plate of food and two gallons of palm wine as part of a bereavement care package until the twelve days and dismissal rite (*mgbasa ọnwụ*) are completed. These are presented to the sons of the deceased.

It needs to be stated that the influence of Christianity on tradition and culture has led to significant changes, in that the funeral rites (*ịkwa ọnwụ*) for deceased parents in Nsukka town now take place immediately after interment. Before, it was not so. Instead, a period of some years was allowed to pass to give those involved time to get prepared, financially. Whenever they were ready for the funeral rites and ceremony for their deceased mother the sons of the deceased would perform the *iku egọr* rite. This entailed calling the in-laws together for a meeting to inform them of their readiness to begin the funeral rites and ceremonies for their deceased parent in earnest. After much deliberation, dates for the ceremonies were agreed upon to suit the convenience of all. The funeral rites and ceremonies were usually held on three consecutive days and to ensure that rains did not disrupt the ceremonies, the dates were usually fixed for during the dry season. The in-laws would be told to give their wives cows to be presented on *Oshue-ajị* day. After other deliberations on modalities, the in-laws would be served with pounded yam, okra soup with two sizable pieces of meat each, and palm wine. A pig would be slaughtered, the carcass divided and the portions appropriately shared amongst the in-laws.

On the agreed upon dates, the funeral rites (*ịkwa ọnwụ*) would begin in earnest with the *Oshue-ajị* rite. The *Oshue-ajị* is a social-cultural funeral outing by the deceased's daughters in the company of their husband's relatives, which showcases expensive ceremonial clothes and other paraphernalia worn by the daughters of the deceased and their entourage (Uzoagba, Uzoagba, & Nwigwe, 2018). During the *Ọshue-aji* rite the biological daughters, adopted daughters, and daughters-in-law of the deceased are key performers. The adopted daughters and daughters-in-law arrive at the funeral venue from their respective husbands' houses with cows (usually bought for them by their husbands) together with their relatives, friends, and well-wishers. They dress gorgeously, wearing rattles (*izere*) around their ankles and holding *nza*. Their cat-walk movements are usually punctuated intermittently with free medley dance steps (Figure 4) which, according to Ikwuemesi and Onwuegbuna (2018), "are a culturally codified means of denying the reality and pain of death among the Igbo and rekindling hope and courage in the living" (p. 11). In solidarity, some onlookers show their appreciation by giving money. This

Figure 4. Accompanied by relatives, friends, and well-wishers, a daughter performs a free-medley dance step while going to *Ọshue-ajị*, 2018. Photo: Chikwunonso Uzoagba.

general movement makes everything lead to the event venue amid great fanfare. As each daughter arrives at the funeral venue, they hand over the cow to the deceased's eldest son, who gives them a goat in exchange, as tradition demands.

The enactment of the *uru-onwu* (wake) rite follows immediately after the *Oshue-ajị* rite. For this rite, married women from the deceased's village gather in the compound façade of the deceased at night. Standing, they will repeatedly sing these songs: *Ụkwụ ejie anyị n'egwuzooo, anyị jị ejeje sanyị jaa laaa*! (Our legs are tired because we have been standing for a long time, are we coming in or are we to go home!), and *Anyị jadịna n'opopo sa anyị ja adịna n' akpụkpọ agụ* (Are we to sleep on mats or tiger leather?). The songs prompt the children of the deceased to officially usher them into their seats and treat them as royalty by providing them with basketsful of wrapped balls of pounded yam, a big pot of okra soup, wrapped pieces of meat, and four gallons of palm wine for their entertainment. Through the medium of a song, the women at a given point call out the names of the male children of the deceased to come and show their appreciation by putting money into a calabash kept on the ground (see Figure 5). The song says *Bịagden naa naa*! (Come out one after another to show you appreciate us!). If any of them delays in heeding this call, the women sing a cajoling song with the person's name as follows: *Inọ nime ụlọ egwu ọrh, me nee g nwụr*! (You are inside the room having sex while your mother is dead!). The female children of the deceased and their husbands, and the grandchildren of the deceased are called upon one by one to give the women money.

The women are given a live goat as tradition demands (see Figure 6), which they

Figure 5. The son of the deceased heeding the women's call, 2019. Photo: The author.

Figure 6. Women with a live goat during the *Uru onwu* rite, 2019. Photo: The author.

kill by beating it to death. The carcass is jointed and the meat boiled and eaten. The gesture reaffirms the fact that by "attending another's funeral, the living negotiates theirs as well as knowing that eventually we will become corpses someday. Death therefore has the capacity to make everyone equal in the cycle of our being" (Ikwuemesi & Onwuegbuna, 2018, p. 4). This again reflects a Nsukka adage which states *bọshị́ onye kwar madụ b'h ọkwar onwonye* (literally translated, it means: the day one participates in someone else's funeral is the day one performs one's own funeral, knowing that as humans we are also potential corpses).

Also during the *nvule ọnwụ* (carrying back the dead), a cloth symbolizing the corpse will be wrapped and carried on the shoulders by two able-bodied men. This is called the *ịrụa ọnwụ* rite. A type of masquerade known as the *Akatakpa* appears during the *ịrụa ọnwụ*. On sighting it, women sing sonorous songs as follows:

Ivuanyigadah, ivuanyigadah!
Translation: No matter how heavy a load may be its heaviness is not felt by Adah—the insect!
An'h kudele bia hụar ịgwe eka! An'h kudele bia hụar ịgwe eka!
Translation: Any animal that is greater than the vulture let it fly and touch the sky!

The *Akatakpa* dances to the songs and "when in performance, the dexterity and the effects of the précised, prescribed or improvised movements (dance step) can be perceived as the aesthetic provisions that the audience enjoy" (Ukweku & Ophori, 2020, p. 25). After the dance, a chair is reserved on which he can sit down. Women then seize the opportunity to drop money on the ground in front of him and make supplications, asking him to beg death to stop killing them as it is believed that his coming out is to console them through his spectacular display.

Dressed gorgeously and in the company of relatives, friends, and well-wishers, the *Akatakpa* and young men with sticks following behind the deceased's female children progress to their mother's village amidst fanfare and the playing of local music such as *Ikorodo* and *Adabara*. They wear rattles (*izere*) around their ankles, hold animal hair attached to a stick (*nza*), and moving rhythmically continuously, exclaiming *Mama m alaa!* (Mother is gone!). The body movements and gestures are to show people that they are at peace with their husbands and therefore adequately taken care of in terms of food, clothes, and general wellbeing. Such occasions provide opportunities for honoring women and showing them love—this is why cows are bought for them to perform the funeral rites for their deceased parents. It is during such ceremonial outings that a visual assessment of the womenfolk takes place to determine how well they live with their husbands.

When they arrive at their mother's village, the eldest surviving son of the family welcomes them. The symbolic cloth along with a cock, a goat, and a cow, are handed over to him. The following morning the animals are slaughtered by the eldest man in the village square to complete the ritual. As noted by Arumona (personal communication, April 18, 2020) after slaughtering the cow, the oldest woman (*Onyishi Ụmụnwunye*) collects part of the mid-body of the slaughtered cow called *Ukwu eshu*.

In pre-Nigerian Civil War years, a woman who had performed the funeral rites for her deceased parents with a horse joined a cult called *Ọgbọ Obodo*. To join the cult, she invited long standing members of the cult over to her husband's house. On their way when honoring such an invitation, they sang a song thus:

Ọgbu eshu ekweg ọgba n' ụkọrọ anyịnya anọg nsue oo!
Ọgbu eshu ekweg ọgba ooo!
Ọchụkọ anyị jide anyị na anyị ayogde ooo!
Me ọchụkọ anyị dagakwa, ne he achigde!
ooo!! Hahahaye, haye, haye!
Translation: Those who kill cows are not to be blamed because killing a horse is very expensive! If she, who wants to be like us, succeeds, we will be glad! But if she fails, who will laugh her to scorn!

When they arrived, they were entertained with food and drink, after which they initiated the intended member into their fold. This anecdote is relevant to the study because it is one of the functions women perform towards the cultural performances in Nsukka town.

Women in the Performance of Traditional Title Ceremonies

During ceremonies involving title-taking, like *Onogwu, Ozioko*, Arụma, and Ishiwu for men and *Ogbuanyịnyị, Onyishi Ndiom*, and *Omerubo* for women, important roles are played by women. For example, during the yam roasting (*ihụji*) ritual, tradition demands that an aspirant's wife go and wait at the entrance of her husband's yam barn (*Ọbaji*) where the husband meets her and intones: *Onyenye ugo di nya ne di gbarebekere n'ọnụ ọba, ọyagnya nashị, ne ọyakọg'nya n'ek* (beautiful wife of her husband, who has come to the yam barn, you will be given some tubers of yam. Even though one may not have money, one has tubers of yam to give to you). The significance of this meeting and the intoning of the folktale is to show that women hold the keys to their husbands' stomachs. After the recitation, the wife will be given some tubers of yam to roast. She scrapes the skin with an *Ụma-ekwu*, a kitchen knife, cuts them into pieces, and puts them in a local container called an *Ọkwa*. After preparing *inene-akpaka*, a local sauce of sliced fermented oil bean seeds (*Pentalethre Macropylla*), the wife then pours this on the sliced roasted yams and presents the dish to her husband. For his part, the husband presents it to the oldest man in the village to offer prayers to the ancestors. In this process, the oldest man throws some of it on the ground as a way of extending the fellowship to the ancestors. At the end of this exercise, the husband then gives some money to his wife to perform the ritual of the washing of the plates (*ịsacha arịa*).

On the eve of title-taking, *Uru-ama*, daughters married out into other villages and towns gather in the aspirant's house. According to Omada (personal commu-

nication, August 30, 2018), "they sing different songs that would be drawn from the people's folktales till dawn. Examples of the songs are as follows:

Anu ka Udele!
Anu ka Udelebja hụar ịgwe eka!
Translation: An animal that is more than vulture should come and touch the sky.

Ndole nwụrụ manya?
Ọbụ anyị nwụrụ manya, Ọ bụ ndiomu nwụrụ manya, Ọgana ada gboyi gboyi iya!
Ndole riri ụtara ji? Ọ bụ anyi riri ụtara ji. Ọ bụ ndiomu riri ụtara ji. Ọ gana ada gboyi gboyi iya!
Translation: Who drank wine? We are the ones who drank wine. Women drank wine. And it is sounding *gboyi gboyi.*

Note that *gboyi gboyi* has no meaning. It is just a chorus accompanying the song.

The folksongs are rendered amid entertainment with pounded yam and soup together with sizable pieces of meat and palm wine. In addition, a goat will be given to them. They are provided with food and drink for breakfast and the clearing of throats for singing songs till dawn.

Women's age-old traditional titles include *Orinechi*, *Ogbuanyịnya*, *Onyishi Ndiom*, and *Omerubo*. It should be noted that the title *Orinechi* can be bestowed on both males and females. It is bestowed on men and women to celebrate them and at the same time for their children to perform their funeral rites while they are still alive. When this happens, they have witnessed their own funerals while still alive. To bestow this title, their children must present a cow, goats (male and female), and a cock to the eldest man (*Onyishi*) of the village to carry out the necessary rituals. These animals are slaughtered in the village kindred house (*Obuama*) and their meat shared accordingly amongst the eldest men, Council of Title Holders (*Ndọha*) and *Ụmụada*. Recently, an *Orinechi* title ceremony took place on December 28, 2020 in honor of Theresa Eze, married in Owere-Enu village, Nsukka. On the day, she dressed in her best attire, wearing a beaded white necklace and bracelets and holding *nza*—the symbol of the title (Figure 7). Her relatives, friends, and well-wishers showered her with gifts and money, showing their solidarity. Food and drink were served to all those who graced the occasion. According to Ezugwu (personal com-

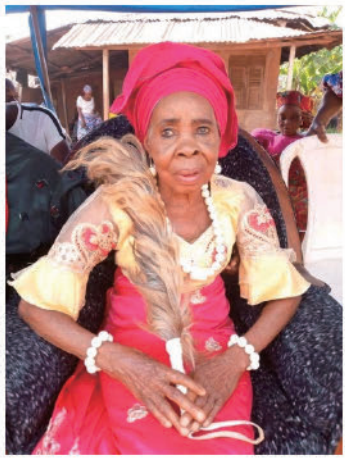

Figure 7. Theresa Eze during the taking of her title of *Orinechi*, 2020. Photo: The author.

munication, April 18, 2020), the title attests to the saying that whatever good one intends to do to another should be done while the person is alive and not when he or she is dead. This is because the dead cannot see, hear, nor eat. When interviewed by the researcher, Theresa Eze expressed her deepest joy, saying: "*Akwa ma mụ ne ndụ* (My funeral celebration has been done while I am still alive). I now know how my funeral celebration will be when I join my ancestors." She seized the opportunity to thank her *chi* (personal god) and her ancestors for keeping her alive. She also thanked the local people and her children for spending money to bestow the title on her.

The title of *Ogbuanyinya* is taken by a married woman who has used a horse to perform her parents' funeral rites. In the company of her children, relatives, well-wishers, and those playing traditional music, she progresses to her village on top of the horse. They sing a song to mock other women who could not provide horses during the *Ọshue-ajị* thus:

> *Onye anyịnya na-agụ lakwuru di enye ne mgbede enyas, ke dienye saan okwu n' mgbe agbakwa! Adla anụma ụhọbụ, wer'eshushue gbapiogde n'obu ooo*!
> Translation:
> One who earnestly desired a horse should have gone to sleep with her husband in the night and made him happy so that he would meet her need in the morning! The foolish woman, who heard it the admonition, ran to the husband's bedroom in the day ooo!

Onyishi Ndiom simply means the oldest of the married women in the village. It could be in a woman's father's village or in her husband's village. This means that when a woman becomes the eldest woman in the village, she will traditionally perform certain rites. During these rites, she will invite the locals and entertain them with pounded yam accompanied by soup, meat, and palm wine. After entertainment, the invitees give her money to fulfill the *Ọhụ egba* rite. From that day till her death, the venue of monthly meetings involving women will be her house, and when a funeral cow is slaughtered, the mid-body section will be given to her as her portion, commonly called *Ọchọr*.

Omerubo is another title taken in Nsukka town by interested members of *Ụmụada* who desire to become worshipers of the *Nkwọ* goddess. With this title, an aspirant pays homage to the oldest among the *Omerubo* whose duty it is to confer the title on her. In the presence of her children, the Council of Elders, and local people, she will be handed the local calabash bowl (*Ade*) that contains Odo (*Dracaena arborea*) and a calabash rattle (*Ọsha*). She will also wear a beaded necklace (*Akaa*) around her neck. The conferment is followed by entertainment involving palm wine, food, and meat. Holders of the title *Omerubo* become devotees of the goddess *Idenyi Nkwọ*, pouring libations and appeasing it at every *Nkwọ Onunu* festival.

Ụmụada and *Ndiom-alụalụ* as Custodians of Justice and Conflict Managers

The *Ụmụada* is described by Amucheazi (2002) as "the association of daughters of the patrilineage that have been married within or outside the community, usually involved in the settlement of disputes among the different sections of the community or on serious issues affecting the community. In this role, they succeed where men fail because of the respect accorded to them, and the community is never allowed to dispute their judgment" (p. 247). In Nsukka town, the *Ụmụada* is a highly revered and feared women's association that settles disputes and deals with recalcitrant individuals. Their decisions are final. For instance, whenever there is a land dispute and men have employed every possible way of settling it to no avail, the members of the *Ụmụada* are called upon to look into the matter and settle it amicably amongst the parties. They do this by uncovering the truth and telling it as it is "no matter whose ox is gored." As mothers and the custodians of tradition, they are bound by the law of the land to eschew bribe taking and falsehood.

Also when an individual is found wanting, they call the person to order. If any-

one dares to disobey them, they carry out a ceremony referred to as "cooking 'soup' for one to lick," an allusion to the severe punishment to be meted out to the individual involved. They assemble at the person's compound very early in the morning and sing all kinds of derogatory songs until that person pacifies them with a cow, goat, fowl, a basketful of pounded yam with accompanying soup and meat, fourteen gallons of palm wine, and transport fare for each of them. No one would wish to encounter the *Ụmụada* like this; even a court case would be preferable to facing them. As final arbiters when it comes to handling customary issues in Nsukka, a person faces serious trouble if the *Ụmụada* is summoned to address his wrongdoing.

The contributions of the *Ụmụada* cannot be overemphasized. Among other things, they help check excesses in human behavior in Nsukka. According to Onyesoh (2021), "The Ụmụada is a powerful example of an indigenous institution of women peacebuilders. Ụmụada are women's associations that derive their effectiveness from their traditional status and sociopolitical power, which provide them with the legitimacy to engage in mediation and arbitration" (no page). Examples abound. Recently, the Echara community in Nsukka was bedeviled with crises over land matters and village seniority. These led to divisions among the local people, resulting in one faction relocating the monthly *Ụka-Eke* meetings from the ancient Umuagwene village square to Amokpo-Echara village square, thereby causing the monthly meetings to be held in two separate venues. All efforts to settle the matters proved ineffective. As the dispute deepened, bitter and deep-seated ill will grew between the two factions, resulting in malicious damage to people's properties which led to police intervention and court cases.

About five hundred *Ndiom-alụalụ* (married women in the villages) swung into action. They wore black clothes as they conducted prayers for eleven weeks, filling the entire village square. They also investigated the matter and asserted that Umuagwene village square had been the only *Ụka-Eke* meeting point from time immemorial. They therefore invited both factions, the Council of Eldest Men, and priests from the five Catholic Church parishes in Echara community to the St. Joseph Catholic Parish, Agu-Echara, where they announced their verdict, advising the Council of Eldest Men to revert to the status quo ante by returning to the Umuagwene village square for the Echara community's *Ụka-Eke* monthly meeting. They also advised that all police and court cases be withdrawn. It needs to be mentioned that some of the women stated bluntly that if the men failed to heed their call for peace to reign in the Echara community, they would stage a protest and register their grievance with the Enugu State Government.

As a result, the council of eldest men, being fully aware of the implications of the *Ndiom-alụalụ*'s decision and statements, harkened to the voice of the women and summoned a meeting (*Ọgbarizụ*) where, among other things, they considered returning to the Umuagwene ancient village square for Echara *Ụka-Eke* meetings (Nwonyishi George Ezugwu Omada, personal communication, November 10, 2021).

The action of these women hinges on both nego-feminism, which emphasizes negotiation and compromise, and radical feminism, questioning how much of our culture is based on patriarchal assumptions. Since taking this stand, the *Ndiom-alụalụ* has received much praise and support, both at home and from abroad.

Women's Roles in the *Ọmabe* Festival

The *Ọmabe* festival is another cultural event in which women are involved. "*Ọmabé*" refers to masked spirits assumed to be incarnations of ancestors. Nsukka town is made up of Nkpunano, Nru, and Ihe na Owerre. Among the cultural festivals celebrated in Nsukka town is the *Ọmabe* masquerade which is an annual event, taking place in each of these three places in turn. The *Ọmabe* arrive from the spirit world in Nsukka to stay with the living for at least five months before departing to the spirit world. The origin of the *Ọmabe* among the Nsukka Igbo is difficult to unearth. However, at different times, researchers like Basden (1976), Cole and Aniakor (1984), and Fosu (1986), among other scholars, have tried to trace the origin of this belief. Though there is no definitive explanation, the *Ọmabe* may have originated in Idoma in the present Benue State of Nigeria. It is in this regard that Aniakor (1978) writes:

> It is therefore possible that Igbo Ọmabe and Idoma Ọmabe have a common origin forthe Ọmabe festival and vice versa. If not, then the Ọmabe festival certainly has a trans-ethnic scope covering a wide geographical area. Nsukka elders say that like divination language only comprehensible to other diviners, the Ọmabe language is neither Igbo nor Idoma but is surprisingly comprehensible on both sides of the line.

There are different and distinctive types of *Ọmabe* masquerades in Nsukka. While some are aggressive and entertaining, others are ritualistic and wield charms to ward off danger. Among the aggressive ones are *Ediogbene Nwakawododo* and *Oriọkpa*. *Echarịcha* entertains while others which are collectively referred to as the

Figure 8. Woman initiate, Ọyimaa Lọlọ Celestina Ezema (center) with her Echaṛịcha masquerades, 2022. Photo: The author.

Ishimaa fall into the ritualistic category. Different types of *Ishimaa* masquerades are *Ọdụma Ejọg, Ugwu Ọyịna Ete, Ajaka, Okpoko*, and *Ikejọkwọ*, among others. They are identified based on their structural features, recognizable through costumes, head structures, and performances. They are "a meeting point of several Igbo artistic enterprises such as architecture, theatre, drama, music and dance, and minstrelsy, among others" (Asogwa & Odoh, 2021, p. 21).

The *Ọmabe* cult is composed exclusively of men. Women are not allowed any form of direct involvement and participation except for those who have taken the *Ọyịmaa* (friend of masquerade) title by way of initiation and induction into the masquerade cult. After completing the initiation and induction rites, they begin to participate fully in *Ọmabe* activities. As mothers of masquerades (*Nnemaa*), they are permitted to commission and have in their possession masquerade costumes, particularly that of the *Echaricha Ọmabe*. One example is Ọyịmaa Lọlọ Ọmabe Celestina Ezema (see Figure 8). They are allowed to go to *egmaa*, the grove where *Ọmabe* masquerades take place. They can also enter the *Ọmabe* house, known as Ụlọmaa, whenever the *Ọmabe* are playing melodious and sonorous music. Thus, the adage that women beget masquerades and do not know them (*Onyenye mụrụ maa, me nya amag maa*) no longer applies to this category of women. They are highly revered among men.

On the reason behind her initiation, Celestina Ezema, an initiate of the *Ọmabe* cult in Nsukka town, said that she was initiated into the cult because she at a time saw an apparition of *Ọmabe* masquerades right in front of her family compound. Following this development, a diviner was consulted and revealed the cause: that the *Ọmabe* spirits were requesting that she become their friend. She duly informed the councils of elders, maskers, and title holders, who approved, and immediately started the processes, involved and completed them. As a result, she has become a virtuous woman (*lọlọ*) which is added as a suffix to *ọyịmaa*, hence, the full nomenclature of her title "Ọyịmaa Lọlọ Ọmabe."

Women can be initiated into the *Ọmabe* cult for other reasons. Aniebo Nwezugwu (personal communication, June 2, 2019) said that during the civil war years between 1967 and 1970, Nsukka was the first town to be attacked by the Federal troops. This made the natives flee their homes to faraway towns for refuge. When the war eventually ended and the survivors returned home, they saw many houses burnt, including the abode of the sacred *ekwemaa* (wooden xylophones). Knowing that the replacement of the age-old xylophones would be a herculean task, the elders were unhappy. To their surprise, a certain woman, Nkwọ Idenyi, brought them out. She had hidden them to protect them from being burnt. Seeking to reward her, the elders unanimously bestowed on her a title with the name "*Ọyimaa*" and from that moment she became a member of the *Ọmabe* cult. This led to the woman knowing the masquerade and hence she was called "Woman who sees the nakedness of the masquerade" (*Onyenye n'ahụ maa n'ọtọ*). Even though Asogwa and Odoh (2022) state that "what these women has achieved does not completely overturn misconceived beliefs and assumptions regarding women's role in masking performances" (p. 1), the remarkable thing about the *Ọyimaa* is that their initiation into the *Ọmabe* masking tradition has to some extent changed the existing narrative and stereotype of the prohibition of women from masquerading rituals and ceremonies. In this way, an avenue through which women can navigate and negotiate gender issues in the patriarchal Igbo society has been created.

Amongst the Nsukka Igbo, women sell masquerade accessories as well as weaving and sewing masquerade costumes. They provide the wrappers that are tied around the waists of the *Ishimaa* masquerades (see Figure 9). In so doing, they believe that they are clothing their husbands' dead fathers (*Nnadi*) who occasionally pay them visits as masked spirits. According to Ezugwu (personal communication, March 10, 2017), "before the return of the *Ọmabe* masquerades, a night masquerade, metaphorically referred to as the 'Kite' and that watches over the land (*Egbe*

Figure 9. Ishimaa masquerade with women's wrappers wound round its waist, 2020. Photo: The author.

oche al), makes an announcement that *Ọmabe* requires some mats and food. In making this announcement, it calls out the names of married women in the village, telling them to provide a mat for *Ọmabe*." When this happens, the women are jubilant that the ancestors have remembered them and will shower them with blessings. This motivates them to meet the demand. When the masquerades eventually arrive, the happy women welcome them by spreading their wrappers on the ground for them to walk on.

After their arrival, on the morning of the *Afor* market day referred to as the *Ụtụtụ ahọ*, women gather at the village square to listen to the melodious tunes played by the Ọmabe. They present everyone with food. This leads to the playing of a verse of a song to show appreciation and it goes thus: *Ndiomu anyi ememe ọkọchị ke udumunyi, al do menemeneooo*! (Our women have turned dry season into rainy season, let the land bless them abundantly!).

Wives usually keep buckets of water at the entrance to their houses for their initiated husbands to take their bath on their return from escorting the *Ọmabe* on its way back to the grove. They also rub palm oil on their feet in carrying out the ritual (Agbo, personal communication, February 13, 2020). Oyimaa Okoro (personal communication, July 14, 2020) said that her father, the late Onyishi Omeje

Nwokoro, told her that bathing and rubbing palm oil upon returning successfully from escorting the *Ọmabe* masquerade is particularly significant in that the ritual helps to purify and ward off the *Ọmabe* spirit so that the safety of their households will be guaranteed.

Women, Traditional Marriage Ceremony and Postpartum Care

Amadiume (1987, p. 189) believes that the terms "matriarchy" and "patriarchy" should be redefined. This is because no absolute patriarchy exists in terms of practices in Igboland, in Africa, or indeed in any culture in the world. Igbo society exhibits both patriarchal and matriarchal attributes; this can be seen in such areas as family and societal leadership and headship, inheritance, genealogy, and locality, among others (Nwoko, 2012, p. 79). Even though Nsukka town and other parts of Igboland are predominantly patriarchal societies, we see (to give one example) that in relation to marriage, the young girl's mother has a significant influence on the potential success or failure of a suitor's marriage proposal. This is because girls are closer to their mothers than their fathers. They reveal to their mothers instances of male advances made to them and are the first to inform their mothers of suitors' marriage proposals. There is no doubt that women have much influence on their female children. If a girl's mother is for any reason in two minds about a suitor, having on her own part made all necessary inquiries about him, this creates an obstacle to the marriage proposals. In other words, traditionally, it is the mother's full support (or otherwise) of a marriage proposal that determines its success. Women have ways of convincing both daughters and husbands regarding marriage proposals and there are numerous cases where mothers have successfully thwarted such proposals.

All things being equal, when marriage plans are agreed upon, the next stage is for the prospective son in-law to give the would-be mother in-law some money to procure the condiments that will be used in making soup on the day of the traditional marriage ceremony (*igba nkwụ*). This act confers on mothers the honor and respect they deserve.

A day is then set aside when specific marriage rites will be performed solely for the mother of the young girl. On that day, cloths, money, big tubers of yam, and a pig are given to her. This is what is termed the traditional marriage rites for the mother. There is a saying "one person does not beget a child." For this reason, some female relatives of the young girl are each given four yards of cloth and two gallons of palm wine in appreciation of their contribution to the young girl's

upbringing. The palm wine is presented to their respective husbands who in turn invite neighbors to partake in drinking the wine for conviviality.

Once the wife becomes pregnant in her husband's house, her mother will immediately begin to buy stock fish, dried okra, pepper, crayfish, and four gallons of palm oil. When her daughter delivers the baby the husband of the girl will come and inform her parents and bring her mother along for *Ọmụgọ* (postpartum care), the importance of which is to help the newly delivered mother in bathing herself and her child, cooking food, and doing household chores so as to prevent her from becoming depressed. It is during this period that moral and psychological support are given. After the completion of the sixteen days of *Ọmụgọ*, the son in-law expresses his appreciation by giving her a piece of cloth, a chicken, two gallons of palm wine, and a bottle of strong drink. On her return, she gives the two gallons of palm wine and the strong drink to her husband who calls and entertains the neighbors. Her fellow women gather and sing the following song:

> *Ọjụgụ me nwaọnye je enye m. Ukwu George, ụgbọ al, ego, onye ge enye m!*
> Translation: If not because of a child, who would give me cloth, a car, and money and all the good things of life!

Uchendu (2006) notes that the over-riding goal for women-to-women marriage in Igboland is for women to have children through other women for inheritance purposes. These women would have male friends who would be impregnating them. She points out that among the Igbo, a barren widow or one who had no male child by her deceased husband has no claim to the deceased's property. She further states that if, however, a woman "marries" a wife and begets, a male child from her, she would have an inheritance from the husband through the male child born for her by her "wife." The fear that the man's family line would become extinct in the absence of a surviving male child would no longer exist. In line with this, Nwoko (2012) argues that "women-to-women marriages in Igboland were not contracted in response to the sexual emotions or attraction of the couple but simply as an instrument for the preservation and extension of the patriarchy and its traditions" (p. 69). Note that woman-to-woman marriages are both for protection of the widow and also for inheritance purposes. Buttressing this, Igbo creative writers such as Urama (2019) portray "male daughters" and "female husbands," and some same-sex marriages among women in Igbo culture as cultural devices being employed toward solving the problems of impotency, barrenness, and not having a male child who will inherit his father's effects. In so doing, ac-

cording to Ezeigbo (2012), they "were able to secure the family investment and properties and prevent capital flight from the patriarchal lineage" (p. 31).

In Nsukka town, women are allowed to "marry" other women for the purpose of begetting a male child or children for their late fathers who could not do so during their life time. The reason is simple, that the lineage will not be obliterated and the properties not be shared out among other relatives. When a woman sets out to find a wife for her late father, she will summon the elders to inform them of her intention. Once given the go-ahead, the marriage processes will begin. After their completion, the wife will be having sexual intercourse with designated men for the purpose of procreation so that the *Obi* (the family lineage and house) will not be taken over by grasses. Male children born through such arrangements are usually named "Obiechina" (let the family house/lineage not become extinct), "Amaefuna" (let the family lineage not get lost), or "Afamefuna" (let my name not get lost), among others.

Conclusion

As shown in this study, women have been treated as a focus in the enactment of material culture and tradition in Nsukka town. To deepen our understanding of the vital roles they play in these ceremonies and activities, women's active involvement and participation in the *Nkwọ Onunu* and *Ọmabe* masquerade cultural festivals, burial and funeral ceremonies, marriage ceremonies, postpartum care, title taking, dispensing of justice, and conflict management have been examined, detailing their contributions. Based on these findings, the study argues that while there are certainly many ways in which the women of Nsukka are subjugated and denied their rights, it also needs to be acknowledged that they are at the same time afforded the opportunities to play central and important roles in the culture and tradition of Nsukka town as demonstrated above. The reason and implication of this are because of the respect accorded women, encapsulated in saying such as *Nne di nsọ* (mother is sacred), *Nne amaka* (mother is beautiful), *Onye sị na ofe nne ya siri, adịrọ ụtọ* (who says that the mother's soup is not sweat), *Ụmụnwanyị bụ ide vu ụlọ* (women are the pillars on which the house rests), *Ụmụnwanyị bụ ugegbe ezi n'ụlọ* (women are the mirrors through which the family is seen), and *Ihe ọbụla ana eme, ma nyanyị adịrọ ya, enwero isi*, (whatever is done without women's involvement is incomplete).

Finally, it is from the extrapolation of issues surrounding the politics of gender representation that the study of the tangible and intangible cultural heritage of

Nsukka town emerges, providing an insightful reading of African gender expression and arguing that it is not completely right to say that women are pushed to the margin. The study therefore opens up an avenue for critically engaging with women's standpoints, as well as the functions they perform in the patriarchal Igbo society.

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Appendix:

Examples of Questions Answered by the Informants

1. Of what significance is *Igba echi* on the one hand and *ivu oromee* rituals to the young women and little under-age girl children?
2. What is the rationale behind displaying the clothes of the deceased during the lying-in-state of the remains?
3. Are there women's share(s) of the cow slaughtered for the deceased?
4. In what ways do women get involved in the *Ọmabe* festival?
5. What is the origin of the title *Ọyịmaa* in Nsukka?
6. What makes a woman take the title of *Ọyịmaa*?
7. What does the bestowing of *Ọyịmaa* attest to?