

## **Pre-colonial African Gender Cosmology and the Gender Equality Nexus: “The Road Not Taken” in Igboland, Nigeria**

Chidi M. Amaechi

*University of Nigeria, Nigeria*

Edwina U. Amaechi

*University of Nigeria, Nigeria*

---

### **Abstract**

African gender cosmology is often deemed to be wrapped up in patriarchal domination. However, such perceptions consider neither what was obtained during the pre-colonial period in Africa nor the distorting external influences on African societies. Sometimes, the alien cultures are, ironically, praised for the liberation of women from the shackles of a barbaric and cruel patriarchal culture, without considering how the anti-equality Western gender worldview of the Victorian era helped to derail the indigenous one which would have been more amenable to the trending notion of gender equality. Using the pre-colonial Igbo society of southeastern Nigeria as an example, this paper attempts to prove, from a historical perspective, that the indigenous African socio-political and cultural structures and practices hinged largely on the complementarity of the sexes, as opposed to total male domination. The paper is based mainly on primary data sourced from direct oral interviews and focus group discussions. In a historical descriptive and analytical manner, the information was subjected to critical analysis in order to ascertain the actual structure of Igbo traditional gender relations during the stated period. Significantly, the realization and espousal of this more sympathetic foundation of African indigenous gender culture, especially in this era of cultural reawakening in the continent, will surely lend strong support to the attainment of gender equity in Africa and beyond.

---

### **Key words**

African gender relations, gender equality, gender complementarity, Igbo culture

## Introduction

The view of the UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, that “achieving gender equality and empowering women and girls is the unfinished business of our time” since “women’s participation makes peace agreements stronger, societies more resilient and economies more vigorous” (UN Women, 2018, p. 4), unequivocally captures the stance and ultimate intent of this study, especially with regard to Africa. The prevailing impression of gender relations in traditional African societies tends to support the existence of patriarchy, male domination, and the relegation of women to the background. This is mostly because males occupy headship positions and are responsible for final group decisions, even on issues that concern women, youth, and children. This has continued to encourage the development of feelings of superiority and domineering attitudes and practices by men, which inhibits the attainment of gender equality in the continent. A larger percentage of the blame is often placed on African indigenous culture which is inappropriately perceived as being wrapped up in a patriarchal-oriented masculine dominance. Worse still, especially in this era of cultural reawakening in the continent, this misconception inadvertently rationalizes and consolidates the view that male domination is an original component of African culture.

Conversely, others contend that pre-colonial African culture was gender-friendlier than presently imagined, as it, in a complementary manner, assigned important socio-political, religious, and economic roles to women and concentrated enormous powers on some traditional women’s groups (Achon, 2015). Consequently, women participated actively in the political administration of their various communities, played legislative roles, constituted themselves into important pressure groups, and were kingmakers, peace-builders, advisers, priestesses, and diviners (Amaechi, 2018; Amucheazi, 2002; Olisa, 2002). This healthy socio-cultural synergy between the sexes in many parts of Africa was disrupted by colonialism, as observed by Molema (1975). It is also contended that in Nigeria, as was the case in some parts of the continent, the British colonial authorities, influenced by the prevalent Victorian-era gender tradition which relegated women to the background, made extensive use of men and thereby stripped women of the rights and privileges they had hitherto enjoyed (Uchendu, 2002).

This paper is an attempt to use the pre-colonial gender relations among the Igbo ethnic group in Nigeria as a microcosm of what obtained in most pre-colonial African societies to ascertain the historicity of the view that the pre-colonial gender worldview of the people tilted toward a complementarity of the sexes relatively

more reflective of the prevailing notion of gender equality. In this regard, critical analysis of and useful deductions from the religious, political, economic, and peace-building roles of women in pre-colonial Igbo society provide a good foundation and yield positive and reliable conclusions that could significantly improve the traditional perceptions of gender equality and ultimately influence gender relations in Africa.

## **Conceptual and Theoretical Clarifications**

### **Gender Equality and Gender Relations in Africa**

The attainment of gender equality in Africa has continued to attract the attention of both researchers (Amaechi & Muoh, 2018; Chant & McIlwaine, 2016; Cornwall, 2005) and organizations (UN Women, 2015a, 2015b; UNESCO, 2017). UNESCO's (2017) views of gender as "the social meaning given to being a woman or a man," and gender equality as "equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities for women and men and girls and boys," (p. 13) are in line with the stance of this study. This is especially the case because they "reflect social characteristics rather than biological differences in defining a woman or a man"; mean that women and men can "enjoy the same status and have equal opportunities to realize their full human rights and potential to contribute to political, economic, social and cultural development and to benefit from the results"; and indicate "that society values equally both the similarities and the differences between women and men and the different roles that they play" (UNESCO, 2017, p. 13).

Unfortunately, efforts so far have not resulted in the expected reduction of the prevailing extent of gender inequality (Amadi & Amadi, 2014; UN Women, 2015a). "In this scenario," according to Amadi and Amadi (2014), "women in the poor societies such as Africa are most vulnerable as cultural practices apply in key social decisions which negatively affect gender equality" (p. 18). This has led to the view that in Africa "men and women do not always enjoy the same conditions and opportunities, not only in the economic, educational, legal and institutional fields but also in terms of social and human development," in spite of women's vital socio-economic contributions to their various societies (UNESCO, 2017, p. 10). It is reported that 41% of the population of sub-Saharan Africa is living in extreme poverty on less than 1 US dollar per day and that inequalities are more marked than in other developing regions (UNESCO, 2015). However, some writers have alluded to the fact that gender inequality has worsened in Africa since the commencement

of the colonial period (Chuku, 2002; Uchendu, 2002) and this gives the impression that a reversal to the *status quo ante* could make the journey to gender equality less tortuous.

Fortunately, the international institutions and agencies concerned are not resting on their oars. Believing that “there are no immovable barriers to gender equality,” UNESCO, in synergy with the African Union (AU), has continued to channel its efforts toward “building peace through peaceful, resilient, gender-inclusive societies” and “building institutional capacities for sustainable development and poverty eradication” as means of tackling the root causes of gender imbalances in Africa (UNESCO, 2017, p. 12). This ultimately ensures “that women and men enjoy equally the right to have access to, participate in and contribute to cultural life” (UNESCO, 2017, p. 21).

Significantly, both the United Nations and UNESCO resolved to focus more attention on highlighting the activities and achievements of great women in history, which involves “promoting and encouraging women’s initiatives in culture and involving women in the safeguarding of African cultural heritage” (UNESCO, 2017, p. 21). This rationalized the idea of “digging” into the past of the various African societies to extract those indigenous cultural practices that can provide the needed healthy cultural synergy with which the idea of gender equality could be easily grasped and actualized.

Besides, this idea of delving into history can increasingly be seen as expedient when one considers the retrogressive side of the trending post-colonial notion of cultural emancipation and resurgence in Africa which has led, and still leads, various African societies not only to seek to re-enact their cultural practices but also to make efforts to link their present practices to their culture. Unfortunately, the idea has also influenced the rediscovery and revival of some appalling practices that are abhorred by global conventions, as in the case of female genital mutilation (FGM) (Nam, 2018). More worrisomely, mainly as a result of many years of cultural impositions and borrowings which blurred some groups’ vision of their “past,” some African groups tend to source their cultures from distorted or inaccurate versions of their past, sometimes inadvertently. Such situations, invariably, lead to wrong conclusions, as in the case of the traditional gender relations among the Igbo ethnic group in Nigeria where the colonial Victorian-era gender perceptions are sometimes used to distort the course of Igbo gender relations history. The need to clarify the past can therefore hardly be overemphasized.

## Gender Complementarity

As used in this paper, gender complementarity presupposes that the male and female sexes are naturally imbued with distinct features and abilities that enable men and women to complement each other in order to ensure the optimization of the available resources and the attainment of societal peace and harmony. In African traditional settings, the belief is that men are naturally sturdier, physically stronger, and more egoistic and therefore undertake the more arduous tasks; women are deemed to be tender, caring, persevering, and more spiritually inclined and therefore take on the less physically arduous but more morally demanding tasks. Consequently, though men apparently occupied the leadership positions in the traditional African societal arrangements, women played important religious, political, social, and economic roles that complemented those of the men. In traditional Igbo society, for instance, adequate considerations were given to both men and women in the scheme of things. The people observed that all things were created male and female (*Oke na Nwanye*), including human beings, with different attributes. The Igbo therefore realized at an early stage the need for a cooperative relationship between the two sexes, but based on complementarity (Anyanwu, 1993, p. 115) and not necessarily equality.

## The Theory of Acculturation and the Theory of Cultural Imperialism

The main thrust of this paper is informed by the Theory of Acculturation and the Theory of Cultural Imperialism. The former has been defined as “the process of cultural change that occurs when individuals from different cultural backgrounds come into prolonged, continuous, first-hand contact with each other” (Redfield, Linton, & Herskovits, 1936, p. 146). It conveys the possibility of changes occurring through cultural appropriation or diffusion, which buttresses the idea that it would have been easier for the indigenous African gender complementarity worldview to evolve to gender equality than the interposed Victorian-era male domination culture. This is all the more true with the continuing invention of technological facilities that can augment women’s natural physical abilities and with which they can overcome the traditional gender “complementarity” barriers. Similarly, the theory of Cultural Imperialism elucidates the results of the imposition of European culture on Africans during the colonial period. It refers to “the sum of the processes by which a society is brought into the modern world-system and how its dominating stratum is attracted, pressured, forced, and sometimes bribed into shaping social institutions to

correspond to, or even promote, the values and structures of the dominating centre of the system” (Schiller, 1976, pp. 9–10). As Njoku (2002) rightly observed, “external influences, first from the Arabs and later from the Europeans, with their male-centered governance systems, were mostly responsible for diminishing the social and political statuses of African women” (p. 55).

### Pre-Colonial Gender Relations in Igboland

The Igbo are one of the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria and have their original homeland in the southeastern part of the country. Politically, they form the overwhelming majority of the population in the five states of Nigeria’s south-eastern geo-political zone—Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo—and also form a significant part of the population in other states, such as Delta and Rivers. The search for the actual place of women and gender relations generally in pre-colonial Igbo society has generated conflicting strands and debates. At one extreme are those who project the view of male domination—that pre-colonial Igbo society was a man’s world where women were subordinate and subservient to the men and were arrogated inferior positions (Basden, 1938; Green, 1964; Paulme, 1971; Uchendu, 1965; Uchendu, 2002). At the other extreme are the likes of Chinweizu (1990) and Van Allen (1972) who support the view that the women actually controlled the men and society, regardless of the apparent picture of male domination. However, between the two extremes are those who contend that males and females complemented each other based on their respective natural attributes and potentials (Acholonu, 1993; Amadiume, 1987; Anyanwu, 1993; Ifeka-Moller, 1975; Leith-Ross, 1965; Njoku, 2002; Ojiakor, 2008; Uchendu, 1993; Wipper, 1982). Such dividing lines were also visible, though in varying degrees, among the present study’s oral interview respondents.

Interestingly, a common denominator among the aforementioned lines of thought and the oral responses remains the view that British colonial rule, which was mainly influenced by the prevailing Victorian-era gender ideology, restricted the women to household chores and thereby disrupted the *status quo ante*. Nevertheless, this does not preclude the possibility of domination by either of the sexes. This paper, therefore, tries to take the argument to another level by looking closely at religious, political, and socio-economic activities in pre-colonial Igbo society with the intention of ascertaining if and how males and females complemented each other based on their natural gender attributes and potentials until the inception of British colonial rule.

## Method

For its historical research, the study made use of both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources consist of oral information obtained through direct oral interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). The initial interviews and FGDs were conducted from March to August 2011 and from August 2014 to January 2015 in the course of other broader research on the traditional role of Igbo women in peacebuilding. At this stage, the survey respondents were drawn from a research population which included the five southeastern states of Nigeria—Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo—where the Igbo constitute the overwhelming majority of the population. Fifty elderly male and female respondents conversant with indigenous traditions were interviewed in each of the states. In order to fill some research gaps, additional respondents from the Delta and Rivers states, where the Igbo also form a significant proportion of the population, were interviewed between 2017 and 2018. Secondary data were sourced from books, journals, and reports obtained from libraries and the Internet.

Since the present study set out to discover the core elements and dynamics of gender relations in Igboland during the pre-colonial (before 1900) and colonial (1900–1960) periods in Nigeria as well as their openness to gender equality, the interview and discussion questions developed for the research were carefully structured and administered to achieve that purpose in a fair and unbiased manner. The information obtained was analyzed using the historical descriptive and analytical method.

## Discussion of Findings

From the findings, it is obvious that the Igbo believed that males and females were designed by the creator but differently endowed in terms of physical structure, ability, and the bestowal of spiritual attributes (Agama, 2014). This perception pervaded Igbo socio-political, economic, and religious arrangements in such a way as to enable the two sexes to complement each other in order to ensure the optimization of the available resources and the attainment of societal peace and harmony. The arrangement equates to the idea of “specialization,” considering the fact that each of the sexes was allowed, encouraged, and assisted to play its assigned role/s naturally, roles the opposite sex could not optimally perform, or meaningfully cope without. This is quite different from gender equality which seeks equal opportunity for both sexes devoid of any form of prejudice. In this study, the pre-colonial religious,

socio-political, and economic practices of the Igbo are used to explicate the above complementary scenario.

### **Igbo Traditional Religion and Gender Complementarity**

The Igbo, as Ogbu Kalu (2002) observed, perceived the universe as a three-tiered structure, comprised of the sky above (*Elu Igwe*), the solid earth (*Ala*), and the underworld (*Ala mmuo*). The sky was seen as the abode of the Supreme Being (*Chukwui*), the Earth Deity (*Ala*) and humans inhabit the earth, while the ancestors and other numerous spirit beings dwell in the underworld (Kalu, 2002). The Igbo believed that these tiers did not exist in isolation, that there existed an intricate and dynamic relationship or interaction among them, and that the fates of the humans were inextricably determined by the Supreme Being, the Earth Deity, and other spiritual forces. This religious worldview had far-reaching implications for gender relations in traditional Igbo society.

In the first place, the Supreme Being (*Chukwui*) was symbolized as a male figure. He was seen as the creator of all things and was venerated as such. However, humans could not see, touch, or communicate directly with Him. This led to conjectures, symbolisms, and the use of intermediaries that were easily resorted to during the regular sacrifices, rituals, and divinations in ways that sometimes suggested that the existence of the Supreme Being was rather “forgotten.” Next to the Supreme Being was the *Ala* Deity, a female goddess humans interacted with and resorted to on a daily basis (Ezekwe, 2014). The deity was seen as the source of fertility in humans, animals, and plants and any action against her precepts was deemed injurious to life generally. Such deviations were followed with elaborate propitiation and purification rituals which made the desires of the *Ala* Deity the accepted norms and traditions (*Omenala*) of the Igbo (Okeke, 2014). The significance of this can hardly be overemphasized. The “Igbo theory of life reckoned with the positive value of the input of females for the achievement of desired goals” from inception, as vividly captured by Anyanwu (1993, p. 115). Invariably, this led to the elevation of females in traditional Igbo socio-religious life. It became the belief of the people that any female who maintained the required level of moral and spiritual uprightness, especially on her natal soil, could influence the decisions of and attract much benevolence and power from the *Ala* Deity. Such was the source of strength and courage usually exhibited by the *Umuada* (daughters of the lineage) in Igboland (Amaechi, 2018).

Second, both males and females occupied the positions of priests/priestesses or



were custodians of the deities and oracles. In fact, females were very conspicuous in the case of the *Ala* Deity and her agent gods during the pre-colonial period. Apart from being symbols of fertility, like the *Ala* Deity, women were sometimes preferred because of their naturally affectionate and tender dispositions, as well as their moral and spiritual uprightness (Eneja, 2014). In general, the fact that the custodian of a deity or oracle was a woman did not make the males deviate from the expected reverence and obedience to the deity. As observed in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), Okonkwo respected, obeyed, and even took on board cautions from Chielo, the priestess of *Agbala*, regardless of his socio-political and economic prowess. This is quite unlike what obtains among present-day religions, most of which relegate women generally, and even female priests (where they exist), to the back seats.

### **Traditional Igbo Political Life and Gender Complementarity**

The pre-colonial Igbo political arrangement was mainly a decentralized one, as every community lived and operated independently. Even within the individual communities, political power and authority were shared among the constituent units in ways that met the aspirations of the people. The family (*Ezi na ulo*) was the basic unit of the traditional Igbo socio-political ordering. It was followed by the Kindred (*Umunne*), the Village (*Umunna* or *Onumara*), and the Town (*Amala*), which was the highest unit. The headship of the units followed a gerontocratic arrangement whereby the first male child (*Okpara*) occupied the headship position in the family and held the *Ofo* (symbol of authority and justice), while the eldest family held the *Ofo* of the kindred and so on up to the town level. At these levels, the men usually gathered to discuss and had the final say on issues concerning the socio-political unit. As emphasized by Irene Mba (2011), the assumption then was that the men were better equipped by nature, both physically and emotionally, to cope with the rigorous demands of political leadership. However, in the same way as the men, women had their separate associational gatherings at all the socio-political units or tiers where they discussed issues relating to the community, including its well-being, and through which they advised, and even check, the men on particular courses of action (Anyanwu, 1993; Azu, 2014). The two most prominent of the women's associations in Igbo society during the period were the association of the daughters of the lineage (*Umuada* or *Umuokpu*) and the association of married women (*Ndiomi alu-alu* or *Alutaradi*). These existed alongside the men's associations in every unit and usually met both on a regular basis and during emergency situations to discuss issues pertaining to the maintenance of peace and order in their various units. They ad-

vised the men and sometimes used pressure to enforce their demands, as alluded to by both Van Allen (1972) and almost all the research respondents, both male and female.

Besides, women were also directly involved in the formal political administration of some Igbo communities, like Ogbaru, Onitsha, Nnobi, and parts of Nsukka. As affirmed by Ojiakor (2008), “as a group, women were politically important but as individuals, they accounted for little, except among the Ogbaru where female chiefs,” called *Ogene and Onowu*, “existed and among the Onitsha where a dignified female chief called *Omu* existed alongside the *Obi*” (King) (p. 51). Anyanwu (1993) also observed that in Nnobi, “patriarchal and matriarchal ideologies” were juxtaposed in the indigenous political structure and “made it possible for women (notably first daughters) to serve as ritual elites and also became titleholders” (p. 116). Furthermore, in parts of Nsukka, like Lejja, the *Umuada* participated directly, actively, and effectively in the politics of the community (Amaechi, 2016). A selected number of the lineage daughters (*Umuada*) married in the same community were usually constituted and initiated into the *Umuada Oba*, a women’s council which existed, and still exists, alongside the *Oba Lejja*, the men’s council. They usually discussed and took binding decisions on issues relating to the overall development and progress of the community and settled disputes that threatened the peace of the community. It was mainly such direct political responsibilities exercised by the contemporaneous Igbo women generally and the *Umuada* in particular that Ifi Amadiume (1987) portrayed in the incidence of “male daughters and female husbands.”

Another aspect of pre-colonial Igbo political life that conferred indispensable powerful rights and roles on the females (daughters), even though it favored the men, was the right of inheritance. Usually, the male children inherited the political headship authority and the family’s material possessions from their forebears, since the daughters were expected to marry out of their various villages and towns. However, the same traditional system tried to correct this seeming injustice by heaping enormous spiritual and socio-political powers on the daughters (*Umuada*), regardless of their marital statuses but more so for those who were married. The presence and active participation of the *Umuada* during the sharing of a family inheritance among the male children were indispensable because it not only conferred both spiritual and political legitimacy on the entire business but also guaranteed justice and equity to all their brothers. It followed, therefore, that these lineage daughters were usually sought after, respected, pampered, sometimes even lobbied to attend, and were usually sent back to their marital places with enormous gifts

from their brothers each time they graced such occasions or came to settle disputes for their natal kinsmen (Odum, 2011).

With time, the *Umuada* emerged as one of the strongest groups in the Igbo traditional political administration. According to Sir Chinedu Obilor (2011), powers were deliberately assigned to the *Umuada* to enable them to check the “excesses” of their brothers, especially their tyrannical and dictatorial tendencies. Olisa (2002) has also observed that the *Umuada* group was “the most powerful women pressure group in the average Igbo community” and was among the pressure points in the Igbo traditional political arrangement, together with the title holders (*N̄z̄e na Oz̄o*), age sets of both elders and the youth (*Otu Ebiri*), medicine men (*Ndi Dibia*), priests of the Earth Deity (*Ez̄e Ala*), and secret societies, among others (pp. 225–226). It was common, therefore, for individuals and groups to appeal for the intervention of the *Umuada* whenever they felt cheated or unjustly treated and whenever obnoxious or unpopular policies were being thrust on the people. Ironically, it was also common for the male traditional power brokers to appeal to the *Umuada* whenever their powers were unduly flouted. However, in most cases, it was the just or aggrieved party that took cases or reported situations to the *Umuada*, who always made sure that justice prevailed and that normalcy was restored in their natal communities. The role of the *Umuada* as a pressure group was also aptly captured by Ogbu Kalu (1993) when he said that “the women as *Umuada* constituted a control system on the exercise of power” and that they could through “a symbolic protest of leaving the village, signal that a Chief has been rejected and should be changed” (p. 16). Similarly, according to Ojiakor (2008), if an *Okepara* or *Isi Obi* (the first son and heir) “failed to listen to *Umuada*, the latter had the power to ban members of the clan from answering his calls” (p. 53).

Still on the pre-colonial Igbo political administration, women generally also featured prominently in the area of the enforcement of laws and decisions. This was especially significant considering the fact that, as Omenka (1993) observed, during the period traditional Igbo society lacked a police force in the modern sense of law enforcement. It was common for the women generally, either as daughters (*Umuada*) or as women married into the community (*Ndiomi alu-alu* or *Alutaradi*) or for both groups, to join forces in order to enforce the laws of the community, including laws enacted by them. Whenever they noticed or were informed of the breaking of such laws and in the face of the men’s inability or apathy, the women usually met to agree on a possible date and mode of intervention and enforcement. Their enforcement tools included boycotts, strikes, sit-outs, mass emigration, stoppage of culinary and sexual obligations to the men, ostracism or banishment of the offenders, nude

parades or the threat of such, and the placing of curses on the offenders. Van Allen (1972) captured it thus:

“Sitting on a man” or a woman, boycotts and strikes were the women’s main weapons. To “sit on” or “make war on” a man involved gathering at his compound, sometimes late at night, dancing, singing scurrilous songs which detailed the women’s grievances against him and often called his manhood into question, banging on his hut with pestles women used for pounding yams, and perhaps demolishing his hut or plastering it with mud and roughing him up a bit. A man might be sanctioned in this way for mistreating his wife, for violating the women’s market rules, or for letting his cows eat the women’s crops. The women would stay at his hut throughout the day, and late into the night, if necessary until he repented and promised to mend his ways. Although this could hardly have been a pleasant experience for the offending man, it was considered legitimate and no man would consider intervening (p. 170).

Meek (1973) also captured how women’s groups exerted significant and even overbearing influence on their fellow women, as they also tried, convicted or acquitted, and imposed fines on themselves, even in cases of women’s insubordination toward men. Generally, it was this role of women as pressure groups in the traditional Igbo political system that led to the women’s later outbursts, such as the 1929 Aba Women’s War, against the obnoxious policies and actions of the colonial authorities in Igboland. It is unimaginable that the women suddenly emerged from traditional political domination to exercise such powers and with the ferocity they did in 1929 if they were not used to such a culture *ab initio*.

### **Conflict Resolution in Traditional Igbo Society and Gender Complementarity**

Another area where women participated and where gender attributes and considerations influenced the delineation of roles in pre-colonial Igbo society was in conflict resolution. Usually, the men occupied headship and leadership positions and, invariably, the men’s councils handled issues and settled disputes within the unit. Conversely, the women’s councils handled the affairs of their members and the more serious issues, like land disputes and murder cases, were referred to the men. However, the way the men handled such cases determined whether the women would support the judgment, embark on a protest against the men, or appeal to the *Umuada* (Otubo, 2013). Sometimes, the reverse was the case for disputes that defied

the ability of the men to achieve lasting solutions. In such situations, as Mrs. Nneka Izuchukwu (2014) observed, it was common for the men to deliberately hide behind the women in order not to expose their “mannish” weaknesses. According to Njoku (2002), in such delicate matters, the men “were wont to defer to the sensibilities of the women” because the women possessed the required “intuitive hunches which were lacking in men” (p. 61). This was because the women were generally beheld as epitomes of compassion, patience, humility, honesty, justice, tolerance, and respect and these qualities were commonly exhibited by them during such settlements and earned them the respect of the men (Mbagwu, 2011). In support of Jell-Bahlsen’s (1998) earlier submission on *Umuada*, Njoku (2002) stated that as agents of the Earth goddess (*Ala*), they were:

endowed with religious and judicial authority [×××]. The *Umuada* came to the assistance of any lineage member, male or female, anywhere. Few people, if any, would dare to challenge the *Umuada* whose curse is feared (p. 61).

According to Meek (1973), they “exercised considerable authority in the community, for not only are they arbiters in quarrels between women, but they sometimes intervene to settle quarrels which the male authorities have been unable to settle” (p. 31). Amucheazi (2002) observed that “in this role,” the *Umuada* association “had in the past succeeded where men had failed for such was the respect accorded them that the community was never inclined to dispute their judgment” (p. 247). Perhaps this informed the occasional honorific references to the *Umuada* assembly as “the last court of appeal in a given community” (Ojiakor, 2008, p. 53).

The women also played important gender-influenced complementary roles whenever ceasefires became expedient during wars. Usually, the men took the final decision on whether or not the community should go to war and also constituted the soldiers, as the women were considered too emotional, considerate, peaceful, and fragile by nature to be involved in such a blood-letting enterprise, except as spies whenever that became absolutely necessary. Usually, in a frenzy of physical strength and the irresistible urge to proudly showcase their military prowess, especially for the attendant societal honor, the men were in the habit of throwing caution to the wind. Unfortunately, the male nature did not include the ability to be humble and accept the need to retreat, even when weariness and uncertainty recommended such a course of action. However, the women were always at hand to save their “brave” menfolk during such indecisive moments.

Very often, it was the women's groups, notably the *Umuada*, which sued for peace, achieved ceasefires, and mediated and resolved conflicts, as well as coordinated reconciliatory activities (Ihuoma, 2014). Apart from the titled men (*Nzè na Ozo*), the women or their leaders, especially the very elderly ones, regardless of which warring side they belonged to, could enter the scene of battle without being harmed. The major requirement for such an important mission was to hold fresh palm fronds (*omu*), a sacred object, and their presence in such a manner signified a temporary ceasefire which served as a foothold for the commencement of mediation. In such cases, serious curses were believed to attend any show of recalcitrance on the part of the soldiers. The women were therefore well-equipped by nature and culture to easily achieve what most of the men were unable to attempt. Unfortunately, modern conflict resolution practice is yet to fully come to grips with the natural need for women during conflict mediations and resolution, especially at the grassroots level in Africa.

### **Traditional Igbo Socio-Economic Life and Gender Complementarity**

In the traditional Igbo family setting, roles were carefully delineated in such ways that both males and females complemented each other. Ordinarily, men were assigned the responsibility of providing for the needs of their families and they worked hard in order to meet their natural obligation (Onwuchekwa, 2014). It followed, therefore, that the men remained away from the house most of the time, depending on the nature of their occupations and season of the year, and had little or no time to stay with the children. The women, on the other hand, were managers of the home. They kept the house clean, cooked for the family, took care of the specific needs of the children from infancy to adulthood, and were not required to go too far from the house nor stay away for too long. Moreover, it was the duty of the women to socialize the children by teaching them the norms, values, and good morals with which they could suitably adapt to society.

However, a closer look reveals that this delineation of duties followed the innate qualities of the different sexes. All things being equal, men are physically stronger and more rugged, and can withstand the difficult conditions associated with some arduous tasks, but lack the right temperament to tolerate the seemingly ridiculous demands and needs of children, especially at the very early stages of development (Egole, 2011). Men therefore commonly adopted inappropriately over-bearing approaches whenever forced by circumstances to assist in the direct upbringing of the children. The egoistic nature of the men spurred them to continue to toil to pro-

vide for the family since traditional Igbo society attached much honor and prestige to that activity. Conversely, like most traditional African women, the responsibilities attached by the Igbo to the women stemmed from their being “symbolized as paragons of morality, sacredness, goodness and tenderness” which, together with the women’s ethic of care, “was rooted in their motherhood and their nature which was tolerant of difference, collaborative, non-violent and, as such, peaceful” (Isike & Uzodike, 2011, p. 33). As corroborated by Mrs. Amaka Orji (2014), in traditional Igbo society, whenever a child achieved highly in a chosen endeavor, the father and the community claimed the attendant honor and dignity, but when a child misbehaved or failed to achieve, the mother usually bore the brunt. It is not surprising, therefore, that the women fought against bad morals, laziness, and disgraceful attitudes among children and the youth in the society.

Economically, the specific duties assigned to individuals and even the choices of an occupation in traditional Igbo society were also determined by gender capabilities. In agriculture, the mainstay of the society’s economy during the period, the more arduous tasks of clearing the forest and, sometimes, tilling the soil were “assigned” to the men while the less tasking ones like the planting of seeds and weeding were assigned to the women, especially since men lacked the required temperament or perseverance to face such tasks which were considered to be boring. Similarly, crops like yam which required more laborious tasks and stringent rules were regarded as men’s crops, while the less demanding ones like cocoyam, melon, and vegetables, were considered that of women.

With regard to occupations, it was unimaginable in traditional Igbo society for a woman to choose to be a harvester of palm fruits, a palm wine tapper, or a hewer of wood, or for a man to choose to be a hairdresser or body decorator. This applied to trade, as well. Long-distance trade which required being away from the home for many hours, or even days, was left for the men and women who had stopped child-bearing; local trade, on the other hand, was dominated by women who were still raising children as it allowed them to operate within the home axes, in view of their domestic obligations (Ndulue, 2014). Particularly, the domestic roles assigned to women in pre-colonial Igbo society seemed to equate with what was obtained in the context of Victorian-era gender relations in the Western world (Buckner, 2005). The difference, however, lies in the fact that in the case of the Igbo, the role-dividing lines were not rigid, since changes in the women’s capacities and capabilities, as in the case of long-distance and local trade, usually led to the redrawing of such lines. Besides, women were also actively involved in other aspects of life in Igbo society and were not entirely restricted to domestic affairs during the period.

## Conclusion

In general, a proof of the historical existence of a more gender-equitable complementary tradition, as obtained in pre-colonial Igbo society, reveals the feebleness of both the “female-domination” and especially the “male-domination” schools of thought. By so doing, it dispels wrong notions and disarms those who try to use such spurious evidence as weapons to obstruct the road to the attainment of gender equality, ostensibly in the name of cultural emancipation or reawakening. Logically, the culture of gender complementarity that hinged on the overlapping and often elastic natural capabilities of humans would, especially given the dynamic innovations in human capacity and capability-enhancing gadgets and ideas, would have (and could still) evolve and become gender equity and equality more easily had the colonial period not disrupted the natural course and rhythm of society by imposing foreign structures and concepts on the traditional society. This also utterly undermines the historically bereft and egotistically propelled ‘gender domination’ claim which is, ironically, often resorted to by male chauvinists to rationalize and gratify their hegemonic interests in the name of cultural reawakening. In other words, people would have attained an appreciable level of compliance with gender equality had the shorter road—that of gender complementarity—not been disrupted and distorted. The way forward, therefore, is to revisit our historical conclusions and re-orientate our minds for the sake of fairness to both sexes.



## References

- Achebe, C. (1958). *Things fall apart*. London, UK: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd.
- Acholonu, R. (1993). Igbo women in political limbo. In U. D. Anyanwu & J. C. U. Aguwa (Eds.), *The Igbo and the tradition of politics* (pp. 289–297). Enugu, Nigeria: Fourth Dimension.
- Amadi, L., & Amadi, C. (2014). Towards institutionalizing gender equality in Africa: How effective are the global gender summits and convention? A critique. *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations*, 9(1), 12–26.
- Amadiume, I. (1987). *Male daughters, female husbands: Gender and sex role in an African society*. London, UK: Zed Books Ltd.
- Amacchi, C. M., & Muoh, O. U. (2018). Women and development in Africa: Urbanization and the role of *Umuada* in Igboland, southeast Nigeria. *Asian Women*, 34(1), 85–107.
- Amacchi, C. M. (2016). *Umuada (lineage daughters) and traditional peacebuilding in Igboland, Nigeria, 1900–2010* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Department of History and International Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka.
- Amacchi, C. M. (2018). The religious origin of Umuada peacebuilding culture among the Igbo of Nigeria and the Igbo diaspora. In E. E. Uwazie (Ed.), *Peace and conflict resolution in Africa: Lessons and opportunities* (pp. 145–162). Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Amucheazi, E. (2002). Politics and pressure groups in the Igbo political system. In G. E. K. Ofofata (Ed.), *A survey of the Igbo nation* (pp. 241–250). Onitsha, Nigeria: Africana First Publishers Ltd.
- Anyanwu, U. D. (1993). Gender question in Igbo politics. In U. D. Anyanwu & J. C. U. Aguwa (Eds.), *The Igbo and the tradition of politics* (pp. 113–120). Enugu, Nigeria: Fourth Dimension.
- Basden, G. T. (1938). *Niger Ibos: A description of the primitive life, customs and animistic beliefs of the Ibo people of Nigeria*. London, UK: Frank Cass.
- Buckner, P. A. (2005). *Rediscovering the British world*. Calgary: Calgary University Press.
- Chant, S., & McIlwaine, C. (2016). *Cities, slums and gender in the global south: Towards a feminised urban future*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Chinweizu. (1990). *The anatomy of female power: A masculinist dissection of patriarchy*. Lagos, Nigeria: Pero Press.
- Chuku, G. (2002). African women since 1960: Gains and challenges. *Asian Women*, 15, 1–30.

- Cornwall, A. (Ed.). (2005). *Readings in gender in Africa*. London, UK: James Currey.
- Green, M. M. (1964). *Igbo village affairs* (2nd ed.). London, UK: Frank Cass.
- Ifeka-Moller, C. (1975). Female militancy and colonial revolt: The women's war of 1929, Eastern Nigeria. In S. Ardener (Ed.), *Perceiving women* (pp. 127-155). New York, NY: John Wiley.
- Isike, C., & Uzodike, U. O. (2011). Towards an indigenous model of conflict resolution: Reviewing women's roles as traditional peacebuilders in neo-colonial Africa. *African Journal on Conflict Resolution*, 11(2), 32-58.
- Jell-Bahlsen, S. (1998). Female power: Water priestess in Oru-Igbo. In O. Nnaemeka (Ed.), *Sisterhood: Feminisms and power from Africa to the diaspora* (pp. 101-132). Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press.
- Kalu, O. U. (1993). Ethical values in Igbo tradition of politics. In U. D. Anyanwu & J. C. U. Aguwa (Eds.), *The Igbo and the tradition of politics* (pp. 9-19). Enugu, Nigeria: Fourth Dimension.
- Kalu, O. U. (2002). Igbo traditional religious systems. In G. E. K. Ofomata (Ed.), *A survey of the Igbo Nation* (pp. 350-366). Onitsha, Nigeria: Africana First Publishers Ltd.
- Leith-Ross, S. (1965). *African women: A study of the Ibo of Nigeria*. London, UK: Faber and Faber.
- Meek, C. K. (1973). *Law and authority in a Nigerian tribe: A study of indirect rule*. London, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Molema, S. M. (1975). African manners and customs. In G. C. M. Mutiso & S. W. Rohio (Eds.), *Readings in African political thought* (pp. 35-49). London, UK: Heinemann.
- Nam, Y. E. (2018). The power structure in the perpetuation of female genital cutting in Kenya. *Asian Journal of Women's Studies*, 24(1), 128-139.
- Njoku, O. N. (2002). Women in conflict prevention and resolution: A historical perspective of Nigeria. *Journal of Liberal Studies*, 10(1), 52-71.
- Ojiakor, E. N. (2008). *Igbo women in Nigerian politics, 1929-1999*. New York, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press.
- Olisa, M. S. O. (2002). Igbo traditional socio-political system. In G. E. K. Ofomata (Ed.), *A survey of the Igbo nation* (pp. 218-233). Onitsha, Nigeria: Africana First Publishers Ltd.
- Omenka, N. I. (1993). The church and traditional leadership in Igboland. In U. D. Anyanwu & J. C. U. Aguwa (Eds.), *The Igbo and the tradition of politics* (pp. 241-253). Enugu, Nigeria: Fourth Dimension.
- Paulme, D. (1971). *Women of tropical Africa*. Berkeley & Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press.

- Redfield, R., Linton, R., & Herskovits, M. J. (1936). Memorandum for the study of acculturation. *American Anthropologist*, 38, 149–152.
- Schiller, H. I. (1976). *Communication and cultural domination*. New York, NY: International Arts and Sciences Press.
- Uchendu, E. (2002). Culture: The obstacle to active female participation in governance among the Igbo of Nigeria. *Asian Women*, 15, 73–94.
- Uchendu, P. K. (1993). *The role of Nigerian women in politics: Past and present*. Enugu, Nigeria: Fourth Dimension Publishing Company.
- Uchendu, V. C. (1965). *The Igbos of South Eastern Nigeria*. London, UK: Longman.
- UN Women. (2015a). *The Beijing declaration and platform for action turns 20*. New York, NY: UN Women. Retrieved March 3, 2018, from [http://www.unwomen.org/~media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2015/sg%20report\\_synthesis-en\\_web.pdf](http://www.unwomen.org/~media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2015/sg%20report_synthesis-en_web.pdf)
- UN Women. (2015b). *Progress of the world's women 2015–16: Transforming economies, realizing rights*. New York, NY: UN Women. Retrieved March 3, 2018, from <https://progress.unwom9en.org/en/2015/>
- UN Women. (2018). *Emerging solutions for gender equality 2018*. New York, NY: UN Women HeForShe Movement. Retrieved January 7, 2019, from <https://www.heforshe.org/sites/default/files/2018-10/HeForShe%20Emerging%20Solutions%20Report%202018%20-%20Full%20Report.pdf>
- UNESCO. (2015). *EFA global monitoring report 2015*. Education for All 2000–2015: Achievements and challenges. France: UNESCO.
- UNESCO. (2017). *UNESCO and gender equality in Sub-Saharan Africa: Innovative programmes, visible results*. France: UNESCO.
- Van Allen, J. (1972). “Sitting on a man”: Colonialism and lost political institutions of Igbo women. *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 6(2), 165–81.
- Wipper, A. (1982). Riot and rebellion among African women: Three examples of women’s political clout. In F. O. Durham (Ed.), *Perspectives on power: Women in Africa, Asia and Latin America* (pp. 50–72). North Carolina: Duke University, Centre for International Studies.

### Oral Sources

- Achonu, M. (2015, January 2). Aged c.93, women’s leader. Interviewed at Ehime-Mbano, Imo State.
- Agama, E. (2014, September 19). Aged c.75, traditional chief. Interviewed at Amoffia-Ngbo, Ebonyi State.
- Azu, E. (2014, September 25). Aged c.75, women’s leader. Interviewed at

- Emekuku-Owerri, Imo State.
- Egole, L. C. (2011, April 24). Aged c.60, women's leader. Interviewed at Umuhu-Okabia, Orsu, Imo State.
- Eneja, D. (2014, October 3). Aged c.75, traditional ruler. Interviewed at Umudim Ibagwa-Ani, Enugu State.
- Ezekwe, N. (2014, October 6). Aged c.84, traditional chief. Interviewed at Nimo-Njikoka, Anambra State.
- Ihuoma, E. P. (2014, October 17). Aged c.70, retired civil servant. Interviewed at Ezinihitte-Mbaise, Imo State.
- Izuchukwu, N. (2014, October 8). Aged c.62, women's leader. Interviewed at Aguata, Anambra State.
- Mba, I. (2011, March 25). Aged c.60, women's leader. Interviewed at Owerri, Imo State.
- Mbagwu, R. (2011, March 2). Aged c.72, traditional ruler. Interviewed at Umuahia, Abia State.
- Ndulue, B. (2014, December 22). Aged c.62, women's leader. Interviewed at Umuoji-Idemili, Anambra State.
- Obilor, Sir C. (2011, April 7). Aged c.59, civil servant. Interviewed at Avodim-Obowo, Imo State.
- Odum, E. (2011, May 12). Aged c.90, women's leader. Interviewed at Osina-Ideato, Imo State.
- Okeke, R. (2014, October 17). Aged c.70, women's leader. Interviewed at Akeme-Izuogu, Ideato-North, Imo State.
- Onwuchekwa, E. A. (2014, October 13). Aged c.81, retired professor & traditional ruler. Interviewed at Amaekpu-Ohafia, Abia State.
- Orji, A. (2014, December 18). Aged c.70, women's leader. Interviewed at Afikpo, Ebonyi State.
- Ortubo, N. (2013, January 8). Aged c.68, women's leader. Interviewed at Onueke-Ezza, Ebonyi State.

*Biographical Note:* **Chidi M. Amaechi** (Ph.D., PGDE) is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of History and International Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka. He is a Fellow of SSRC's Next Generation Social Sciences in Africa Fellowship (USA). Dr Amaechi teaches both undergraduate and postgraduate courses, has published widely, attended many international conferences and workshops and belongs to many professional bodies. His areas of interests include International Relations, Peace, Conflict and Gender studies.  
E-mail: [chidi.amaechi@unn.edu.ng](mailto:chidi.amaechi@unn.edu.ng)

*Biographical Note:* **Edwina U. Amaechi** (B.Sc, PGDE) is currently a research student in the Department of Social Science Education, University of Nigeria, Nsukka. She holds Bachelor of Science and Postgraduate Diploma in Social Science Education and has assisted in many field researches. Her areas of research interest include Education, Social and Population Studies, and Gender, Women and Peace Studies. E-mail: [amaechiedwina@yahoo.com](mailto:amaechiedwina@yahoo.com)