

AGAINST THE SILENCING: FEMINIST REVISIONS OF IGBO WOMEN'S ROLES IN NIGERIAN HISTORY

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Abstract

This essay challenges the systematic erasure of Igbo women from African historiography, arguing that Eurocentric and patriarchal scholarship has rendered invisible a history of agency, authority, and resilience. Through feminist historiographical intervention, it recovers Igbo women's central roles across three critical periods. In precolonial Igboland, women exercised economic independence as traders and farmers, wielded political power through institutions like the *umuada*, and held spiritual authority grounded in cosmologies of gender complementarity, particularly the twin-deity *Chi na Eke*. Under colonial rule, women resisted systematic marginalisation through the Aba Women's War of 1929, a mass uprising that successfully challenged British authority and dismantled the warrant chief system. During the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970), women sustained communities through survival strategies, caregiving, education, soldier protection, and peace-building initiatives. By centring oral traditions, community testimonies, and counter-archives alongside written sources, this work demonstrates that Igbo women were never peripheral to history but foundational to its making. This recovery constitutes a feminist intervention that challenges the epistemological violence of colonial historiography and redefines how African history is written and whose voices it centres.

Introduction

In 1965, British historian Hugh Trevor-Roper declared that Africa had no history worth teaching, dismissing the continent as existing in “darkness” outside the light of European civilisation.¹ This pronouncement reflected a broader Eurocentric tradition of scholarship that denied African knowledge systems and silenced African voices. Within this framework, African women experienced a double erasure: they were excluded first by colonial narratives and then by patriarchal histories that privileged men's experiences. The result was a distorted historical narrative in which women, including the Igbo of south-eastern Nigeria, were portrayed as passive, subservient, or “slave wives.” Given Nigeria's cultural and historical diversity, such generalisations are particularly problematic. Nevertheless, the mistaken belief that Nigerian women have always been marginalised continues to persist. This portrayal stands in sharp contrast to the lived realities and oral traditions of Igbo women. From the precolonial period, they were central to economic life as traders and farmers, to politics as leaders and decision-makers, and to spiritual life as priestesses and custodians of shrines. Reverend Bishop Johnson, a prominent West African Anglican bishop who visited Igboland on behalf of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) in the early 20th century, described the Igbo woman as “very industrious and hardworking... far superior to men in this, and are said to have more character in them than men.”²

The role of Nigerian women remains among the most neglected themes in Nigerian history. This work aims to question the gender ideologies that have frequently been shaped, enforced, and reconsidered by both Western and non-Western groups according to their specific interests. Igbo women resisted colonial domination through collective actions such as the Aba Women's War of 1929. During the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970), they sustained households, supported soldiers, and engaged in peace-building that held communities together. Oral traditions, community memories, and feminist scholarship all point to women as agents of resilience and authority, not as silent figures in the shadows of men.

This paper argues that the misrepresentation of Igbo women is the product of Eurocentric and patriarchal historiography rather than historical reality. By interrogating colonial archives, centring oral traditions, and applying feminist frameworks, this work seeks to reconstruct a more accurate account of Igbo women's roles across precolonial and colonial contexts. In doing so, this work demonstrates that Igbo women were never marginal to history but have always been central to the survival, governance, and cultural continuity of their people.

Precolonial Igbo Women

The Igbo people are an ethnic group predominantly found in Nigeria, specifically in the eastern region, which encompasses five central states: Abia, Anambra, Enugu, Ebonyi, and Imo.³ Women in this society are celebrated for their industriousness, unwavering resilience, and significant contributions to their families and communities. Before the advent of written records, oral tradition was the primary method through which societies preserved and shared their histories, customs, and beliefs. In Igbo land, this rich system involved passing down cultural knowledge, values, and history through spoken words, songs, chants, and storytelling.⁴ Respected elders typically perform them during communal gatherings. Key components included didactic narratives, proverbs, riddles, and communal praise singing.⁵ These elements not only entertained but also taught proper conduct, beliefs, and social order. This vibrant system laid the groundwork for literature and continues to shape community identity. It provided historical context and ethical guidance, which remained the primary means of sharing and preserving historical accounts, myths, legends, and collective memory.⁶

One of the major categories of narrative in this tradition is *akuko-ala*, which encompasses myths, legends, and personal narratives presented as true accounts of past events.⁷ These stories are deeply influenced by the dominant presence and power of women in all aspects of life and culture. The term is derived from two words: *akuko*, meaning “tale,” and *ala*, meaning “earth” or “land.”⁸ Therefore, *akuko-ala* translates to “tales of the earth” or “tales of the land.”⁹ *Ala* held profound significance within Igboland, embodying a wide array of fundamental concepts in traditional political structures, legal systems, cosmology, and religion. At its core, the term signifies a contiguous territory or homeland occupied by a community or nation, akin to “land,” “fatherland,” “motherland,” “homeland,” or “nation” used across various languages. Moreover, it personifies the earth goddess, who, on a metaphysical level, symbolises the eternal nexus between humanity and the earth. The Igbo perceive humans as originating from the earth, drawing sustenance from it, with ancestors residing within it. In their worldview, life is an unending cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, with a return to the earth anticipated upon death. As a deity associated with creation, fertility, nourishment, and mortality, serving as a gateway to the spiritual realm for rebirth, she is represented as a woman¹⁰. This goddess functions not only as a nurturing maternal figure but also as the protector of sacred societal laws known as *omenaala* (meaning “that which is done in the land”) or *iwuala* (meaning “laws of the earth”), which maintain social harmony and regulate interactions with supernatural entities. Violations of their sacred statutes, termed *nso-ala* (“that which the earth abhors”) or *mmeru-ala* (“profanation of the earth”), are believed to summon divine justice from the goddess.¹¹ Portrayed as a maternal figure, she is regarded as the most revered divine figure among the vital powers of the pantheon.

Numerous *akuko-ala* depict the supremacy of women in society. One notable tale involves the female forces found in creation mythology. The creator is a twin-deity known as *Chi na Eke*, which consists of a male principle, *Chi* (the divine power of life), and a female principle, *Eke* (the sacred power of creation).¹² Although the name of this deity has been adopted by Christianity and reinterpreted as *Chi na-eke* (the *Chi* that creates), its original significance persists in traditional rites and invocations that eloquently express its duality. The male aspect, *Chi*, is associated with cosmic light represented by the sun (*Anyaanwu*), which is often worshipped separately as a male deity.¹³ This embodies a key mythical understanding of the co-equality and interdependence of male and female principles of life.

The life-giving power of *Chi* cannot exist without the creating power of *Eke*, just as *Eke* would not be able to create anything without the light-giving power of *Chi*. This notion shows a biological basis for this mythological view of reality. The sperm represents the life-bearing power emanating from the male, while the ovum signifies the life-forming element from the female. Both must work together to create life. This logic supports an understanding of what can be seen as an ingrained feminist consciousness in the culture. If it takes the collaboration of both genders to create life in the empirical world, then the combined efforts of both divine essences are necessary for creation in a metaphysical sense.

The mythology does not share a narrative akin to that of Eve, who was created from Adam’s rib to serve him, nor does it involve a concept of original sin caused by female evil that must be atoned for through perpetual suffering and subjugation of women. Instead, belief holds that male and female beings are summoned into existence by a twin-deity equally composed of male and female forces, emphasising that gender is complementary. Consequently, the culture has developed a system in which men and women are neither equal nor unequal; rather, like the twin deities *Chi na Eke*, they represent balanced forces that play complementary roles in society, each excelling in their respective domains.¹⁴

In *akuko-ala*, particularly in heroic legends, the freedom and power of women are unambiguously highlighted. These legends often assign them roles of significant activism and prominence, ranging from direct participation in battles to serving as supernatural supporters of their sons. These remarkable figures are commonly depicted as

holding the fates of their husbands and children in their loving or strategic hands. For instance, there are oral histories of women who fought alongside men. One story recounts how a queen defied the odds to search for her husband in battle, even entering enemy territory to rescue him.¹⁵ Another notable tale features a mother who composed a famous battle song to protect her only son from going to war.¹⁶ These stories illustrate that the pre-colonial oral tradition is rich in feminist themes and should not be overlooked in the broader context of the evolution of feminism.

Igbo women played a crucial role in pre-colonial Nigeria's economy. They play pivotal roles in trade and market systems, often serving as the backbone of economic life. The Igbo pre-colonial economy was mainly based on agriculture, trade and manufacturing, with farming serving as the staff of life; every man or woman participated in cultivation. Some tasks, such as weeding and planting subsidiary crops like cocoyam and vegetables, were done exclusively by women, who were also responsible for processing farm produce into food. This processing included producing palm oil, winnowing grains, making herbs, and preparing meals. Igbo women also achieved economic independence through petty trading in surpluses such as cocoyams, cassava, melons, and maize. They engaged in trade in crops such as palm oil and kola nuts, as well as in local crafts like pottery. In certain areas, they travelled to nearby markets to purchase these items for resale locally or in more distant markets. It is unlikely they would have shown as much initiative, enterprise, and dynamism if they had remained mere beasts of burden, as colonial literature often portrayed them. In reality, their unique status and individuality were officially acknowledged and safeguarded by society.

Igbo Women during Colonial Rule

During colonial times in Nigeria, there was evidence of Igbo women standing up for themselves and breaking the societal norms they faced. In 1929, they staged what became popularly known as the *Aba Women's Riots* or the *Women's War*. This massive, anti-colonial uprising by thousands in south-eastern Nigeria against British rule and oppressive policies, particularly the imposition of taxation, demonstrated that the colonial government's attempts to develop policies and foster an environment for economic exploitation and political control would not go unchallenged. From then onwards, Igbo women were universally recognised as the most militant of women. A proof that a typical Igbo woman is not one to conform to norms that are beneath them or even be exploited.

Since a male-dominated bureaucracy managed the colonial governance, they were largely marginalised from the new system. In reality, the emergence of the *Aba Women's War* was long in the making. Colonialism, through its systematic exploitation of wealth and the enforcement of Western culture, profoundly affected local populations.¹⁷ The indirect rule system notably changed the political frameworks and, inevitably, reshaped indigenous gender roles, reducing female involvement in these processes. British rule altered the position of various Nigerian women in their societies. Those in the eastern region, most especially, had been traditionally allowed to participate in the governance of the local area and held a significant role in the marketplace as well.¹⁸ Men and women also worked collaboratively in the domestic sphere and were recognised for their critical individual roles. Igbo women also had the privilege of participating in political movements because they were married to elites.¹⁹ Research indicates that colonialism significantly eroded their independence. The gender ideals promoted during this period conflicted with traditional roles.

In Igbo culture, it was evident that patriarchal structures did not completely limit freedom of movement and the ability to amass personal wealth. The British saw these practices as "a manifestation of chaos and disorder", and they attempted to create political institutions that commanded authority and monopolised force. While they considered the political institutions headed by Igbo men, they ignored those led by women, effectively shutting them out of political power.²⁰ Colonial authorities believed that this patriarchal and masculine order would establish a moral order throughout the colony.

The introduction of direct taxation ultimately triggered the war. The British colonial government's plan to introduce a direct tax on women, who were not previously taxed under Igbo tradition, became the most immediate catalyst. Already burdened with supporting their families and helping men pay their taxes, they now faced additional levies. Because they lacked political power within the patriarchal system under colonial rule, collective action became the means to express their dissatisfaction. Taxation was perceived as an infringement on their economic competition.²¹ Since they had not been appointed as representatives of the colonial government like Nigerian men, they did not benefit from the taxes imposed. Their economic and political grievances merged, as anger grew over what they viewed as abusive and extortionate practices by colonial authorities. On December 2, 1929, more than ten thousand Igbo women demonstrated at Oloko, Bende, against the colonial taxation system.²² A primary tactic in the protests was what is known as "sitting". Scholars like Glover have noted that men who did not value women risked the possibility of being shunned and sat on by those who felt normalcy had to be restored within their society. "Sitting on a man" or "making war on a man" was a long-standing tradition used as the

primary weapon against injustices in their society.²³ Scholars like Judith Van Allen, and Monday Effiong Noah have noted that some methods used by Aba women were: surrounding the home of the offender, insulting his manhood, and destroying anything that he would characterise as a prized possession. They would gather at his compound and sing and dance while detailing their grievances against him. They would often bang on his hut, demolish it, or plaster it with mud.

The opposition to taxation stemmed not only from reluctance to give up hard-earned money, but also from its association with practices they believed undermined the moral fabric of society. Organising the 1929 protest required significant coordination and leadership. The Times of London noted: "This was fundamentally a women's movement, organised, developed, and executed by women from the country, without the assistance or approval of their male counterparts, though likely with their silent support."²⁴ One of the prominent female voices against the taxation of Igbo women was Madam Nwanyereuwa. She was from Oloko, an ancient town in the Ikwuano Local Government Area of Abia State, Nigeria.²⁵ She played an important role not only in triggering the revolt but also in gaining recognition for her articulate testimony and intelligence.

Through these actions, "traditional methods for networking and expressing disapproval" were transformed into powerful mechanisms that successfully challenged and disrupted the local colonial administration on a scale that the authorities had never witnessed in any part of Africa.²⁶ Eventually, the protests succeeded in dismantling the warrant chief system. The damage could have been minimised if the audience had paid closer attention from the start. As a result, their position in society improved greatly. In some areas, they were able to replace the Warrant Chiefs and were also appointed to serve on the Native Courts.

The then colonial governor-general of Nigeria, Lord Frederick Lugard, was forced to make the following observations about the Igbo woman:

"She is ambitious, self-reliant, hard-working, and independent... she claims full equality with the opposite sex and would seem indeed to be the dominant partner."²⁷

Yet, from a more superficial observation, it is pretty easy to see the exact opposite: an over ridingly male-chauvinist and patriarchal society in which women appear to be dominated by their menfolk and confined to subservient roles as part of a cartel of "slave wives" in a predominantly polygamous environment. The paradox is indeed striking, and nowhere else, in Igbo traditional arts, is it more eloquently portrayed than in Igbo oral narratives.

Igbo Women and the Biafran War

The Nigerian Civil War, commonly known as the Biafran War, left devastating consequences in south-eastern Nigeria. Caused by political, ethnic, and economic tensions that escalated after a 1966 military coup and counter-coup in Nigeria, the conflict profoundly reshaped Igbo society. While much of the historical narrative centres on soldiers and political leaders, the survival of the civilian population and the endurance of communities during this period were fundamentally shaped by women's efforts. Far from being passive victims, Igbo women stepped into roles of survival, care, and leadership, ensuring the continuity of their families and communities in the face of destruction.

The conflict was marked by famine, disease, and widespread displacement. With food blockades imposed on Biafra, starvation became one of the deadliest weapons. Taking on the role of primary caregivers, women ensured that children and older people received what little food and medical care were available. They organised local food-sharing systems, secretly preserved crops, and improvised nutritional supplements such as "kwashiorkor gruel" to save children suffering from malnutrition.²⁸

Several documented their experiences, notably the late Igbo writer Flora Nwapa, who depicted the hardships and sacrifices through a series of short stories, including "Wives at War" and "Daddy Don't Strike the Match." These stories highlighted participation in the economic aspects of the war effort, especially the significant risks faced in the "attack trade" and the persistent efforts to ensure families' survival amid dangerous conditions.²⁹ They also managed the evacuation of civilians whenever Nigerian forces threatened to take over a town. Additionally, when Biafra faced starvation, valuable possessions like jewellery and wrappers were sold to buy food for families.

The absence of men created new social dynamics where women became de facto heads of households, managing farms, overseeing family decision-making, and ensuring that children remained cared for and educated, even in makeshift war schools. On a larger scale, they acted as community leaders and bridge-builders, mediating disputes between families or neighbouring communities over scarce resources. This leadership role marked a significant extension of their pre-existing influence in Igbo society, reaffirming their resilience in times of crisis.

Despite the Nigerian government-imposed blockade, which cut off Biafra from food and essential supplies, market women found creative ways to keep their communities alive. Oral testimonies collected from Enugu and Owerri recall how they risked their lives travelling through bush paths at night to trade food with sympathetic communities or sneak provisions past military checkpoints. Their baskets of vegetables, cassava, and palm oil were disguised under piles of firewood or concealed in children's carriers. Most of the crops grown for local consumption were unfamiliar in terms of geography and nutritional knowledge. For instance, before the conflict, cassava leaves were recognised in Brazil as an edible product. Initially, experimentation proceeded cautiously, sometimes resulting in fatalities due to a lack of understanding about proper preparation, but gradually knowledge developed about how to utilise cassava safely.³⁰ Additionally, guava leaves were identified as a vegetable. Previously, only the fruit was consumed. Now, alongside the fruit, the leaves serve as an important source of vegetables. Interestingly, in the absence of readily available malaria medication in refugee camps, guava leaves provided a vital treatment for endemic malaria. The nutritional and medicinal qualities of the guava tree played a crucial role in preventing potentially catastrophic death tolls.³¹

Contributions during the Civil War extended beyond agriculture; education also remained a priority. While schools remained open at the war's start, escalating danger led to their closure. In response, a few took the initiative to host educational sessions in their homes, especially in areas that remained relatively safe from bombing for certain periods.

Another set of oral histories recounts how wounded Biafran soldiers returning from the frontlines were protected. In villages across Imo and Abia States, mothers organised collective shelters, tended to injuries with indigenous herbs, and hid soldiers from advancing Nigerian troops.³² Some even dressed wounded fighters in female clothing, passing them off as relatives to protect them from capture. In the later stages of the conflict, delegations travelled to towns and refugee camps to press for dialogue and an end to the violence. Oral traditions recall the composing and singing of songs that both mourned the dead and demanded peace, urging male leaders to listen to the cries of the starving and displaced. In some accounts, dangerous lines were crossed to meet with aid organisations and plead for international relief.³³ Amid the uncertainties, peace-building initiatives also emerged. In some communities, appeals were made to local authorities and even attempted dialogues with soldiers to prevent excessive violence. Prayer meetings, communal gatherings, and cultural rituals were organised to foster unity, healing, and reconciliation. Through these actions, networks of support and solidarity were created that helped communities cope with the trauma of war. This role reflects political agency as peacebuilders. Through standpoint feminism, we see that proximity to suffering gave them a unique authority to articulate the urgency of peace. Their songs and speeches were archives of grief and defiance, embodying a feminist politics of memory that challenged both patriarchal war-making and state indifference.

Conclusion

The history of Igbo women reveals a powerful rebuttal to the silences and distortions of Eurocentric and patriarchal scholarship. Far from being passive or peripheral, they have consistently shaped the course of their society. They did this by governing through assemblies in precolonial times, resisting exploitation and asserting authority in the Aba Women's War of 1929 under colonial rule, and by carrying the burden of survival and leadership during the Nigerian Civil War-sustaining families and communities through famine, violence, and displacement. Across these eras, they emerge not as victims of history but as its makers.

To recover these histories is to challenge the epistemic violence of colonial historiography, which rendered Africa "darkness" and its women invisible. Oral traditions and feminist interpretations serve as counter-archives that illuminate agency and resilience. This recovery is not merely about correcting inaccuracies; it is an act of feminist intervention that redefines how African history is written and whose voices it centres. By re-centring these narratives, this work calls for a historiography that acknowledges indigenous knowledge, values oral traditions, and applies feminist theory to uncover silenced perspectives. Such an approach transforms history from a record of exclusion into a narrative of resilience and authority. Reclaiming this place in history is both a scholarly and political act: it dismantles colonial and patriarchal erasures while affirming voices indispensable to Africa's past, present, and future.

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