

# **WOMEN IN NIGERIAN HISTORY: AN EVALUATION OF THE PLACE OF, AND VALUES ACCORDED TO WOMEN IN NIGERIA**

by

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## **Abstract**

*In varied ages and varied cultures, there have always been concern of how women are perceived and the values accorded to them. Some cultures had high regards for women to the point of encouraging and elevating matriarchy. Other cultures adored women simply as objects of beauty and pleasure. Yet some others who saw the world as the world of men, placed women far below men as lower human beings who should naturally dispose themselves to the needs and decisions of the men. In recent years, the place and value of women in the society have become a major subject of debate that has resulted to different schools of thought such as “feminism”, “women liberation” and “women empowerment”. The approach to any choice in this regard has often been made without regard to, and understanding for the practices obtainable in different cultures as regards the place and values accorded to women. This paper has tried to make room for a better option of women empowerment in Nigeria by evaluating the general practices concerning the place and values accorded to women in Nigeria at different epochs.*

## **INTRODUCTION:**

A very notable feature in human history all over the world is the socio-political standing of women vis-a-vis the men. A great focus is often channelled on the differences between men and women or between male and female. Remarkably, every culture seems to have manifested in its perception of gender phenomenon, an avowed distinction, other than the biological traits, between man and woman. This has led to assigning gender roles and functions in certain cultures. Various religions and traditions of the world are not left out in such contrastive perception of human persons. Some even use scriptures of their religions and traditions to tacitly give credence or support to their avowed perception of the similarities or differences of the genders.

All over the world and probably in every culture, the making of distinctions leading to socio-political value placements of both men and women, apparently seems to have favoured men most while women have often been placed in the lower level of the

ladder. In some other cases, the women have simply been considered inferior in nature to men. Africa in general, and Nigeria in particular were not devoid of this mode of perception, though one may be quick to add that in Africa and in Nigeria, the level of values accorded to women in the traditional setting may be quite different from that of other countries and continents of the world.

This paper aims at briefly evaluating the place of, and the values accorded to women in the traditions and practices of various groups associated with women in Nigeria, using the Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba cultural groups of Nigeria as areas of focus. It seeks to know to what level women were accorded any positive values, socially, religiously and politically, in Nigeria and particularly in these three main ethnic groups of Nigeria. The findings, I believe, will help to position in the right tract, the current drive for women empowerment in Nigeria. In approaching this, a brief highlight on the main concepts of the subject will be followed by a brief historical overview of the issues in question before an evaluation will come as a conclusion.

### **Conceptual Definitions**

a) **Value:** The word value has so many definitions but we can narrow it down to mean the “attributed or relative worth, merit, or usefulness” of something (The Random House College Dictionary). I may also add the word, quality to the elements of this definition.

In the context of this paper, therefore, I presume the “values associated with women” to refer to the quality, the regard, the importance and esteem accorded to women.

b) **Tradition:** Tradition is defined as “something, such as a doctrine, belief, custom, story, etc, that is passed on from generation to generation, especially orally or by example (Chambers 21<sup>st</sup> Century Dictionary: Def.1). The Radom House College Dictionary also defines tradition as “the handing down of statements, beliefs, legends, customs, etc., from generation to generation, esp. by word of mouth or by practice”. For the purpose of this paper, I shall consider tradition to mean the way women were seen and related with in the past by the referred cultural groups.

c) **PRACTICE:** Practice connotes a habitual or customary performance (The Random House College Dictionary). It refers to a way things are actually carried out in a particular setting. Here practice shall refer to what women did or did not do, as well as how they were related with, in the Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba cultural groups.

### **Historical overview of values, traditions and practices associated with women:**

Njoku, once remarked that:

It is becoming increasingly indisputable that in the African historical process, women have played key roles in the areas of home making, human reproduction, economic development,

politics and nation building, including the making of war and peace (2002: 54).

The above opinion seems much in tandem with what was traditionally obtainable among many peoples of Africa. Among such peoples, women generally had remarkable value and high esteem. They were not, as some may have conceived, tools in the hands of men, which could be used and discarded as men wished. In economic and political arrangements, they were, as Oriaku pointed out, rather complementary to men, not inferior (Njoku 2002: 62). This probably informed the stand of some African groups that opted for what they considered African definition of womanhood in concept and actualization. One such group defined womanhood “within African Cosmic order as a human being endowed with all the capabilities and talents required to effectively function and make an impact on all levels of life within the society” (Women in Society 3).

The above conceptualization of womanhood may not be untrue of the Nigerian context and experience, and particularly among the Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba cultural groups. Nonetheless, there is need to point out from the beginning, that the values, traditions and practices of various groups associated with women in these cultural groups varied at different periods of history, and at times, among the different cultures. Thus, one may distinguish the practices that were obtainable in the pre-colonial era from those of the colonial and post-colonial periods of Nigerian history. However, the trust of this paper lies most on the pre-colonial period while the other two periods will receive little attention.

***a) The pre-colonial period***

The pre-colonial history of the Hausa, the Igbo and the Yoruba is replete with accounts of women famed for their socio-economic and political adventures. The picture given by history, however, indicates that their male counterparts have often been taken as the master of the society. Nevertheless, it is a history that acknowledges the values and contributions of women to the wellbeing and growth of the society.

Socially, among the three cultural groups, women were valued for their role in human reproduction. Great care and attention were given to them in the periods of pregnancy and childbirth. Often the pregnant woman was not allowed to do strenuous work as what she was carrying in her was highly cherished and adored. She was given a lengthy period of rest after childbirth, and was pampered and served almost as a lord, though much of such services were usually provided by fellow women but for which the husband had to acknowledge and pay some sort of compensation. This period of rest and recuperation is, for instance, regarded in Igbo culture as the *omugwo* period. A woman in *omugwo* was generally accorded high esteem.

The above picture of post natal care of a woman brings out, however, the other side of the treatment meted on women in these cultural groups. Among these groups generally, a woman without children, worst still a child, was treated with scorn. Generally, the

absence of a child in a marriage was considered the fault of the woman. It was often understood that she was the infertile one and rarely was it imagined that the husband could be impotent. What was more, because these societies and cultures traditionally abhorred adultery, it was often difficult for her to vindicate herself.

The value accorded to women extended also to their importance in the making of the home and the society. The nurturing of good moral and upbringing in the traditional homes and society was more or less, entrusted to women. It was typically a woman affair. When we consider the importance of good up-bringing and good moral to every society, we then appreciate the position of women in those traditional societies. This explains why men before getting married in those days, often made serious enquiries of the kind of mother (though the kind of father was as well inquired of) their would-be spouses had. A Good mother was a sign of a would be good family. That the mother was the embodiment of the good moral of a family is evidenced, for instance, in the traditional Igbo family whereby the husband and father of the house, when a child begins to misbehave, reproaches the wife and mother of the house with such phrases as “woman, talk to your child o!” or “woman, have you seen the behaviour your child? He is getting loss o!” These were, and still remain frequent phrases used by men in their families.

The above recognition notwithstanding, women were sometimes treated unjustly by certain cultural groups. In Igbo societies for example, women often times went through several dehumanizing ordeals in the hands of their in-laws at the death of their husbands. Agonizing enough, it was in the hands of their fellow women relatives of their late husbands that they passed literally through hell, so as to prove themselves innocent of their husbands’ death. Added to this was the acquisition of the woman like a property, even against her will, by any of her brothers-in-law at the death of her husband. Often, the woman was also deprived of the property of her late husband.

Economically, women played a vital role in the pre-colonial Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba societies. In some cases, they had the freedom to attain to whatever height they could in entrepreneurship. In Hausa land, for instance, mention is made of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Queen Amina of Zaria noted as a great importer of slaves and kola nuts (Isichei 1983: 87) and who controlled all trade and duties within the territories she influenced or conquered (Ojiakor 2001: 215). Among the Igbo, even though men planted yam, it was women who tended and nurtured the tendrils. The women were also responsible for the cultivation and tending of most other crops such as cassava, cocoyam, and so on. In most cases, women were equally responsible for taking most of the farm produce to the various markets (Ameke 2013). The role of women in the production and distribution of goods and services in the pre-colonial Igbo societies made many women not only prominent, but also influential in their various communities. The Niger Igbo women deserve a special mention in this instance. Most of the communities along the Niger Igbo gave honours and titles to women who distinguished themselves in economic

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fields. Njoku noted, for instance, that these communities had a special place and title called “*Omu*”, First Lady. She

...was chosen by the *Obi* on the basis of achievement, not ascription, and once chosen and invested could not be deposed. The *Omu* presided over market and other women affairs and enjoyed paraphernalia of office akin to that of the *Obi*. The most notable of these potentates in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was *Omu* Okwei whom Felicia Ekejiuba has described, aptly, as the “Merchant Queen of Ossomari” (Njoku 2002: 60)

In Yoruba land, similar recognition was given to women who were outstanding in commercial prowess. Mention is made of Efunsetan Aniwura, a female figure in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Ibadan. She “became a commercial magnet and was conferred with the enviable title of Iyalode, First Lady, by the Ibadan authorities. The Iyalode title was conferred on the basis of achievement, not ascription” (Njoku 2002: 59).

The picture one gets from the above is that women were vital to the economic life of the pre-colonial societies of Nigeria, and that the freedom of women to participate actively in pre-colonial economic activities was almost unlimited. Their achievements in this domain were equally dully acknowledged.

In the political domain, Isichei noted that:

It is a hitherto unremarked paradox in Nigerian history that tradition attributes greater political power, in certain contexts, to women in the remote past than became possible for them subsequently within the same political structure. (1983: 190)

Women in pre-colonial Nigeria left their mark on the political scene, and in some cases, competed with men for the exalted political positions in their various communities. A celebrated figure in Hausa land is the 16<sup>th</sup> century Queen Amina of Zaria. Amina rose to become the overlord of Zaria, and manifested such military and political prowess that she is said to have conquered and controlled both the politics and the economies of the adjoining territories to Zaria (Ojiakor 1998: 160). On a similar note, Queen Daura, in the Bayajida tradition of the Hausa is a reference point in the role of women in conflict resolution. Evaluating her might against that of the invading Bayagida, she sought an alliance that saved her and her people from destruction and possible annihilation (Njoku 2002: 57).

In the pr-colonial Yoruba land, the practice of women influencing the polity is better illustrated with the role the female figure, Moremi, played in the Oduduwa tradition. This Oduduwa woman went into marriage among the Igbo people who were opponents of the Oduduwa, only to steal the military secrets of the Igbo and reveal them to the former. This helped the Oduduwa in their conquest of the Igbo (Njoku 2002: 58).

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Efusetan, already mentioned above as a commercial magnet, was also reported by Johnson (1973: 391-393) to have wielded a great influence as the *Iyalode* (First Lady). Though she ended up a cruel leader, for reasons of possibly unwelcome circumstances in her life, she had her own soldiers and war lords, and possessed thousands of slaves in her farms and home.

Later pre-colonial history of the Yoruba may not be complete without the mention of Madame Tinubu who rose from pauper to affluence in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Besides her commercial prowess, she influenced many kings in Lagos and Egba land including Akitoye and Dosumu. Her great role in the defence of the Egba of Abeokuta against a Dahomey attack in 1864, earned her the title of *Iyalode* (Biobaku 1960).

In ancient Benin kingdom, Egharevba (1968) mentions of an occasion in its history, where Edeleyo, a daughter of the *Oba* Ewuare, would have become *Oba* after the death of her brother, Ezoti, but was prevented by an incurable illness. Before the illness, she had been offered the throne and was installed the Edaiken. Sadly enough, her case may have led to the embargo on a woman *oba* in Benin as the history of such, Egharevba claims, dates to her period (1968: 20).

Among the Igbo, the role and importance of women in politics cannot be overemphasized. As individuals and as groups, women proved to be a force to reckon with in the pre-colonial Igbo societies. Ojiakor told of not only the political influence of “*Otu Umuada*”, the association of daughters of a particular village or community, but also of its legislative and judicial powers. Referring to *Otu Umuada*, she noted that “In its political and judicial functions, the assembly was the last court of appeal in a given community. It legislated on matters that defied solutions by men” (2006: 230). The *Umuada* was not only laudable in enforcing discipline and justice, it was also known for its mediating role in inter-family, inter-village and inter-community conflicts.

Akin to *Otu Umuada*, but wielding lesser political power, was *Otu Nludi*. As an association, this group provided a forum for women married in the same place to discuss common problems and find common solutions, as well as to defend their rights. They constituted a kind of pressure group on both men and women (Orjiakor 2006: 233). In the pre-colonial Igbo society, both *Otu Umuada* and *Otu Nludi* worked together to maintain order and promote peace and security.

As individuals, women attained important positions in Igbo societies. In the Niger Igbo, for instance, the title of *Omu* bestowed on a woman in Onitsha was nearly equal to the *Obi* (the king of the town). Among the Ogbaru communities, women were made chiefs with titles similar to those of men, for instance, *Onowu*, *Ajie*, *Oduah*, *Omu*, and so on. These had both socio-political and religious functions (Orjiakor 2006: 236-240).

Generally, the pre-colonial women in Nigeria were valued in the society, and were accorded due recognition as a complement to the men.

***b) The Colonial Period***

The colonial period had a different story to tell of these cultural groups' perception of women. This development was not unconnected with the advent of Islam, Christianity and colonialism. It is apparent that these two religions, in the period in question, placed women far below men. These religions projected women as help-mates to men. The colonial government which had the influence of Christianity came to Nigeria armed with the notion of women as second class human beings. Colonial governments discouraged women from politics and engagement in socio-economic organizations. Capturing the feeling of the period, Ojiakor wrote that the "colonial powers shared a basic belief that the role of women was that of help-mate to men and that women were outside the proper realm of political and economic development" (2001: 215). This belief encouraged a situation whereby male children were given the necessary social and economic support and training while their female counterparts were consigned to domestic chores. Thus, while boys were being prepared to become professionals such as engineers, lawyers, doctors and so on, the girls of colonial era were in the girls' schools being taught needle works, crochet, baking and so on, aimed at making them good house wives.

The above view and treatment of women notwithstanding, the picture of the practice during the period depicts a discordant tune to the wishes and anticipations of the colonial governments. It may be true that colonialism reduced the power and influence of women among these cultural groups, but certainly, the women were not subdued. While men were still warming up to find a softer landing in the face of colonialism, the women in Nigeria had already left their indelible mark on nationalism. Mention is made of the impact of the Lagos Market Women's Association which sought to protect the interest of market women. There was also the Abeokuta Women's Union that sought to check colonial excesses, as well as the Aba Women's Riot of 1929 that led to a review of colonial polices in the East (Njoku 2002: 63-64). These groups proved that despite the colonial restrictions, women were still a political force to reckon with. It is not surprising, therefore, that some women were able to attain political heights during the period. For instance, Effah Attoe (2002) wrote that "during the 1950s ... three women were appointed into the House of Chiefs, namely Chief (Mrs) Olufunmilayo Ransome Kuti (appointed into the Western Nigeria House of Chiefs); Chiefs (Mrs) Margaret Ekpo and Janet Mokelu (both appointed into the Eastern Nigeria House of Chiefs). It should be noted that it was also in the 1950s that women were given political franchise in Southern Nigeria under the colonial government.

***The Post-Colonial Period***

Without fear of contradiction, one would say that the colonial experience on the subject of study left a great impact on the post-colonial era. Nonetheless, the general standing or value of women keeps improving quite much since the end of colonialism. In the social sphere, in most places, the degrading and inhuman treatment being meted on women at

the death of their husbands is fast being consigned to the dustbin of history. Gender roles are being less emphasized.

In the educational sector, the female gender neglect has become a thing of the past in many cultures in Nigeria. In fact, in some cultures, for instance, among the Igbo, the very low enrolment of males in schools is rather a thing of great concern. Women now compete with their male counterparts in every field of training. So many women have become lawyers, doctors, engineers, and so on, fields earlier considered as the exclusive reserve of men. Most of them attained the peak of their Career. Names that readily come to mind include **Grace Alele-Williams, a Professor of Mathematics Education who in 1985, “made history in Nigeria by becoming the first woman Vice-Chancellor of a university - University of Benin”** (<http://pulse.ng/2013/03/08/international-womens-day-10-nigerian>) and Dora Akunyili, a Professor of pharmacology, among others.

The practice of women being accorded political influence which was diminished in the colonial era is yet to recoup to a satisfactory level. In all the three cultural groups under study, the attainment of the height of political positions that were witnessed in the pre-colonial period is yet to be experienced in the post-colonial era. Appointment of women into political posts, whether under the military or the civilian regimes, has been very low, especially in the first three decades after independence. However, with the present democratic dispensation and following the recommendations of the United Nations’ Millennium Development Goals, much improvement has been made. More women have been recently elected or appointed into top political offices. In all the republics since independence, Nigeria has been having women elected into the legislative houses. The height of it was when Mrs Patricia Etteh, of Yoruba extraction, became the Speaker of the Federal House of Representatives (from June – October 2007). Some women have also won elections as Deputy Governors in different states, including Alhaja Sinatu Ojikutu of Lagos State and Mrs. Cecilia Ekpenyong of Cross River State in 1991; Dame Virgy Etiabah of Anambra State, 2006 to 2010; and Mrs Pauline Tallen of Plateau State, 2007 - 2011 - among others. Nigeria has even had female presidential aspirants such as Mrs Sarah Jibril, who contested in the primary elections of her party for up to two times. We have also had women who became top ministers in the Federal Government executive Council including Dr. Ngozi Okonjo Iwuala who served under former President Obasanjo’s administration and currently under President Goodluck Jonathan as Minister for Finance, and Diesani Allison Madueke currently serving as the Petroleum Minister, to mention but a few. But this is all they have been allowed so far. It seems the Nigerian society is yet to garner enough trust to hand over the very top political positions such as governor or president to women.

In the economic field, women are now a force to reckon with in Nigeria. Nigeria has recorded many women business tycoons. Ndidi Okereke Onyuike was for 10 years at the helms of affairs in the Nigerian Stock Exchange (NSE), until she was eased out in 2010. In 2013, Toyin O. Falola reported that “With an estimated fortune of \$7.3 billion, Nigerian oil tycoon and a former fashion designer Folorunsho Alakija has displaced Oprah Winfrey as the richest black woman in the world” (October 11, 2013).

**Conclusion:**

It is true that all over the world and almost in all ages, women have received a secondary treatment vis-à-vis their male counterparts in socio-economic and political arrangements. It may be true as well, that in some places, women were considered as inferior beings to their male counterparts, and thus have been regarded with little or no value. Yet, it is as much a truism that in certain other places and cultures, women were accorded greater value than that. The Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba cultural groups could be said to belong to this latter group. Granted these culture groups did not accord equal esteem to both genders, they however, had an understanding of women as colleagues of the men, who with men complemented one another. This was responsible for women being accorded social, economic, religious and political recognitions similar to those given to men especially in the pre-colonial period.

One could, therefore rightly conclude that though certain socio-cultural practices within the traditional system of the Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba were inimical to the woman's self esteem such as the marriage institution (particularly the polygamous set-up) and widowhood, some other factors in the same traditional system enhanced the woman's self esteem and image. These included independence in industry and commerce, participation in various roles in the life of the community, desire to seek fulfilment and self actualization, and acceptance of challenges in the pursuit of her trade and profession and in aiding society when duty calls, and so on. Under such circumstances, it is, therefore not surprising to see that in the cultures under study, women were of great value and had the opportunity to excel and attain enviable heights socially, economically and politically.

The post-colonial period in Nigeria has also seen the enhancement of the image and value of the woman. However, much is still needed to be done. Nigeria is yet to attain the required thirty percent of women in political offices. Unfortunately, it does appear that it is the low self esteem of most women in Nigeria that has kept the system still unbalanced. They have, therefore, often been found to have turned their back against one of their own. For instance, in the People's Democratic Party (PDP) 2010 Primaries that produced the Presidential Candidate for the 2011 Presidential election, despite the numerous women delegates, Mrs Sarah Jibril got only one vote. That means all the female delegates turned against him. Again, the women politicians in Nigeria generally shy away from using their own type as campaign directors or coordinators. They often entrust that to men. Yes, men could be co-opted but their fellow women should be the overall co-ordinator so as to project well the capabilities of the female gender. Nonetheless, a cheering note is that the situation is improving. In the All Progressive Grand Alliance (APGA) 2013 Gubernatorial primaries that produced Chief Willie Obiano as the Anambra State flag bearer, a female, Mrs Uche Ekwunife came second. There are many women seeking to become governors or Senators in the on-going party primaries for the 2015 general elections. The environment would be more enabling for women empowerment that is needed in Nigeria if only women in Nigeria could do more

as a group. There is, therefore, need for women to rise up to the challenges while men should give them greater encouragement.

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