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## Women and Evolution of Cultural Practices Among the Igbo of Nigeria

By Christian Chukwuma Opata<sup>1</sup>, Apex A Apeh<sup>2</sup>, Asogwa Sylvanus Odoja<sup>3</sup>, Alaku Emmanuel<sup>4</sup>

### Abstract

Studies on Igbo women have ignored the part played by either fear of women or respect for them in the evolution of festivals and some customary practices. Embedded in this neglect is the non-recognition of their contribution to the development of their societies. However, evidence that some cultural practices evolved out of fear of women and respect for them by the men abounds as manifest in the evolution of some spirit being institutions, memorialisation of women's war exploits, and veneration of kola nut. Anchored on extensive field investigation, the application of historical narrative and qualitative research method, this study traced the origin of some Igbo customary practices, their gender origins and rationale for some observances. This research, it is hoped, would ensure that the very histories of such festivals and customs are preserved and the efforts of Igbo heroines past are not interred with their bones. Equally, the findings would mitigate the spate of denigration of women.

*Keywords:* Fear, Respect, Women, Festivals, Culture, Igbo, Nigeria, Custom.

### Introduction

In the words of Ugwoke (2017:129-132), since the creation of the universe, man has always exercised superiority over other creations including women. She concludes that part of the reason for men's grandstanding is because God created man from his image and created women from man's ribs i.e. the image of man. She contends further that going by this mindset, it means that the creation of women was an afterthought. Going by this postulation, it appears that men cultivated a belligerent attitude towards women. Obviously borrowed from the biblical account of creation, this notion is fundamentally faulty from the worldview of most Nigerian ethnic nationalities. If one interrogates the ontological order and their relations with the people's cosmology and general notions about existence and sustenance, this notion collapses before reason. If in the people's pantheon, the land is a goddess (feminine), the question then arises, where was the supposed first man born; in the outer space or on the same land that is feminine? If we are to anchor the creation story or myth on the biblical account only, then the Igbo may be said not to be part of that creation myth, as men so created came to occupy the earth, which among them is female, though not anatomically speaking.

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The position above presupposes that some notions about women are jaundiced. This aggressive stance of men in their relation to women may have accounted for the belated embrace by scholars of profound and autonomous studies on women. This is in line with the observation by Afigbo (1989:7) who observes that the study of women as an essential and independent social force, as well as the management of their weal and woes as an intrinsic part of overall social dynamics, is a child of very recent birth indeed. In Africa, women have been presented in historical writing according to I. Imam (1988:30), using four approaches. In the first case, they have simply not been presented at all. Secondly, they have been seen as inferior and subordinate to men. The third trend has been a conception of women's roles as equal and complementary to those of men. Finally, there has been a movement towards seeing women as active agents in the historical processes. Probably subscribing to the fourth group, Morolake Omonubi-McDonnell (2003:9-10) notes that African women play crucial roles in the economic and social sectors of their nations, but the analyses of such functions by Western writers have been wanting in truth and comprehension. She warns that the unfounded generalisation that sees African women as a lump of subordinates is a misplacement, which is anchored on male arrogance.

In the same vein, Awe (1991:211), one of the leading female historians in Nigeria, laments that even though African writers are building up their picture of African society, as distinct from Western nations' picture of that society, African historians seemed to have inherited a certain degree of Western bias, in that they have kept alive in their writings the masculine-centred view of history. She laments that they, in explaining the human experience in Africa, have accepted the male experience as the model, whereas African women, in consequence, are being converted into anomalies. She contends that the eight volumes *General History of Africa* published by UNESCO in 1981, which summarises significant facts in African history say nothing concerning female input to that history. Awe avers that toeing the same line, *The Groundwork of Nigerian History*, the standard text on the history of Nigeria, made no particular mention of the role of Nigerian Women in the development of their communities.

As it concerns the Igbo of Nigeria, Ezenwanebe (2006:139-146) opines that in traditional Igbo society, women are relegated behind the *obi* and men, as providers and protectors, stand like a colossus in public life. Seemingly in agreement with Ezenwanebe, Dike (2015:321-336) informs us that the popular axiom that 'women are seen, not heard' translates, essentially in their cultural context, in two ways that downplay the relevance of women in society; whatever accomplishment or good women are perceived or seen to do should never be trumpeted and as such should not call for proper documentation. This is an anomaly which must have informed Uche-Okeke (1985:21-27) to observe that the crucial role of women in Igbo society has not received full-scale attention. She states that as a matter of fact, there is a dearth of cultural information on Igbo women. The latter writer informs us that researchers like Van Allen (1972) in political science and Juliet Okonkwo (1975) in English Literature acknowledged the same gap. She insists that even when it is apparent that the works of Leith-Ross (1939) and Green (1948) were results of anthropological reports commissioned by the colonial government to help them understand the reasons surrounding the women's revolts in colonial Igboland, studies on women in Igboland is characterized by a paucity of literature. In the same vein, Chinyere Ukpokolo (2011:163-183) argues that the class condition of women in contemporary Igbo society in particular and Africa in general, which is characterized by their peripheralisation in the scheme of state-building and knowledge production, has led to the need for the re-examination of her representation in specific cultural contexts in Africa before the major historical events (partition and colonization) in the continent.

Among the Igbo, women are seen as powerless as made evident by one of their epigram which holds that *nwamiri nwanyi adighi agafe ogwe osisi* (the urine of women does not cross the trunk of a tree-as opposed to that of men). If men should debase themselves by bragging over indiscriminate urinating and using urinating arbitrarily as a sporting test to see how their urine could crossover the trunk of a tree, then something must be basically wrong with such men. This is in spite of the fact that Uche-Okeke (1985:22) opines that African women are the backbone of the continent as they are the chain linking the past, the present, and future of their peoples. Gloria Chuku (2001:8) submits that the recovery of the voices of Igbo women and their life histories is an important research agenda because Igbo women have played and continue to play major, and at times, fundamental roles in the development of Igbo culture, Igbo society, and Igbo history. Unfortunately, they have not been adequately represented in Igbo historical studies and historiography. Chuku (2001) asserts strongly that until Igbo women are given their due position in historical research, Igbo history and historiography will never be complete.

The near neglect of women's contribution to humanity among the Igbo in particular and Africa, in general, could be accounted for according to Nwala (2010:65), in their classification within the same ontological sub-category along with children as 'infants' in matters concerning metaphysical knowledge. On that basis, the domination of women by men is given philosophical justification in African traditional societies.

Premised on the above submissions, it would be germane to investigate the role of African women through the canvass of festivals held in some African nationalities since festivals act as a storehouse of knowledge and tradition as well as transmitters of culture. Ogunba (1987:88) confirms the latter view by observing that the institution of festivals is in itself a giant cultural establishment which can accommodate virtually every experience of the community and pattern it into its idiom as festivals have in them embedded materials that can be of help in the reconstruction of history. Seemingly in agreement with Ogunba, Opoku (1990) argues that festivals are rituals which recur at regular intervals and have as their purpose the expression of beliefs held by a particular society. The society also consciously expect that certain very specific ends will come about as a result of the performance of the festivals and the performance is motivated by the desire to gain some form of satisfaction and is expected to be effected. Festivals take place at special times set aside by a community to commemorate some events of historical, cultural or religious significance, and by the performance of certain rituals, such events are re-enacted, giving both individuals and their communities a sense for meaning and cohesiveness.

Writing on festivals among the Igbo, Nsofor and Maduakor (1979) argue that festivals in Igbo society are periods set apart by communities or groups of individuals for commemorating important events which may be connected with a homage to God, gods, ancestors and spirit or they may be connected with the transition from one season to the other. In almost all cases, festivals are part of these commemorative events and rituals overtones can be detected in the majority of these festivals.

This notion is faulty from the logical point of view. Festivals are not time in themselves, hence they cannot qualify as period(s), rather, festivals are celebrations or events, and as such, are held within specific periods as dictated by the customs and traditions of the people concerned. Hence the present writers subscribe to the view of Onyeneke (1987) who observed that every Igbo community whether at the village group, village or major lineage level occasionally observes festivals which are a public celebration of events considered important and of high value by the community. He contends that events that invite public celebrations maybe those of life crises of individual birth, puberty, marriages, title taking, death, celebration,

marking the farm cycles of planting and harvesting and the veneration of local deities, personal 'chi' (gods as personal spirit) and the ancestors of societies. The views of Onyeneke was corroborated by Ezenagu (2014: 43-54) who holds that... festivals are cultural entertainment through which communities showcase their diverse cultural endowments. As the Igbo remains one of the ethnic nationalities in Africa that their culture is fading away consequent on their contact with alien cultures, documenting the history of their culture requires urgent attention. Since women contributed to the evolution of some of their cultural practices, their roles must be recorded for posterity as that would help in disabusing the minds of those who have subscribed to the notion of women marginalization. Therefore, this work is premised on the Standpoint Feminist theory as propounded by Elizabeth Potter (2006, 131-132). This is to help challenge some views about Igbo culture that portray women as inconsequential.

### **Clarification of Terms**

Fear is defined by McFarland (1987) as a motivational condition aroused by specific stimuli that give rise to self-protective actions or escape. Gürson (2011) maintains that fear is one such emotion that plays an important part in our lives and pre-programmed into all animals and people as an instinctual response to potential dangers. Dewey (1984) posits that fear stops engagement and therefore growth. By extension, Dewey is implying that fear is contemptible, as fear is a sign of cowardice. Premised on these definitions, fear would be construed in this work to mean all panicky measures adopted by the men to dislodge women from the scheme of things and as well deny them of their due place in history to place themselves strategically at the commanding height of events in their polity.

Respect, on the other hand, is defined by Lawrence–Lightfoot (2000:13) as the single most powerful ingredient in nourishing relationships and creating a just society. It, therefore, follows that the idea behind the respect and fear of women and its resultant birth of cultural practices such as festivals in Igboland was targeted at having a just society; a society that would at least accord respect to women who have contributed to the development of their society. Since respect presupposes that we not only acknowledge the wisdom and ingenuity of those we respect, societies, especially preliterate ones, instituted cultural practices that point to the recognition of such knowledge. This gave rise to cultural exercises of which prominent among them are festivals.

Festival as a concept has attracted scholarly attention. Scholars like Akporbaro, (2006:366) are concerned with the origin and roles of festivals in society. He states that festivals have been part of the human society and have their origin in religious belief, historical events or some socio-political desire for social bonding. He avers also that festival serves as a vehicle that provides education for the young towards an understanding of the cultural life and traditions of the people a kind of school. This perception of the role of festivals must have informed Odogbor (2004:1-2) to define festival as a major communal event that expresses the people's general philosophy, attitudes, culture, norms, and the likes which receive general acceptability and participation by the members of that community. As such, festivals are occasions for the appraisal of the heritage of communities both tangible and intangible. Implicit in this latter statement is the fact that festivals are marks of identity formation and bonding through the reenactment of history.

As for custom, Crossman (2017) posits that custom is a cultural idea that describes a regular, patterned way of behaving that is considered characteristic of life in a social system. It,

therefore, follows that people trail their customs not just for the reason that they are by tradition enforced but especially because they are mixed with people's sentiments, feelings and personal obligation. Therefore, custom could be said to be the barometer used in gauging the pulse of society and also a window from which a peep could be taken of the idiosyncrasy of society; a heritage bank that houses both the tangible and intangible.

The central argument of the Standpoint Feminists is that women's voices must be heard from their perspective, not from men. Thus, Potter(2006, 131-32) argues that a standpoint arises when people in a subordinate social location engage in a struggle to change the conditions of their lives and then go-ahead to engage in an analysis of such condition to change it to their advantage.

### **Echoes From the Past**

Africa is a mishmash of many cultures as it contains many ethnic nationalities. However, the masking institution appears to be widespread among many ethnic nationalities in Southern Nigeria where the Igbo inhabit. The history of masking institutions in Igboland is replete with accounts that they are predominantly male institutions. However, such accounts fail to link the founding of the supposedly male cult or institution to fear of women or women generally. This is even when the history of masquerade institution are varied based on the experience of each community. However, among the Ukana of Enugu State, Elo (2007:27-30) insists that the origin of the *odo* masking tradition could be traced to a point in time in the history of Ukana when women virtually controlled the social functions in the community. Through their activities, women relegated the vital position of men to the background. Emotionally upset and uncomfortable with women's domineering stance, the men met surreptitiously and resolved to furtively burrow a tunnel that would run from a thick jungle near the market in the town to the market square. This, they accomplished in two years.

From the said tunnel, an awful creature emerged. Consequent on the appearance of the very strange being, there was stampede but the being ordered all to be quiet, assuring them that his emergence was divinely motivated as he came to solve their problems. However, that was on the condition that men were to be his mediators. Today, the *odo* masquerade cult and festival is a major cultural practice among the Ukana people. For men of Ukana to demean themselves by lying, venerating and valorising deceit, to the extent of celebrating deceit to keep women in this very community under their check is a good example of how fear of women birthed festivals.

Even among non-Igbo societies, some masquerades and the festivals associated with them evolved out of the fear of women's powers and the need to counterbalance the same by men. For instance, among the Eriba of Kogi State, Ododo (2001:1-36) records that Ekuechi festival (*Ekuechi*, which represents the ancestors, is believed to 'descend' (*Chi*) from the world beyond during Ekuechi festival. *Ekuechi* and *Chi* thus respectively form the prefix and suffix in *Ekuechi e Chi* which can be translated literally to mean, "the ancestors are descending". Citing the Adeika of Eika, the traditional Chief of Eika clan in Ebiraland in an interview recorded by Shamoos Adeiza. Adezia according to Ododo (2001), maintains that Ekuechi originated from them- the Eika. The monarch and custodian of the people's culture and oral history state that the real origin of the festival is a traditional secret which originated from necessity. He states that when witchcraft crept into Ebiraland, that it was the women who reigned supreme in the cruel craft and they cheated men by it. Many people were being killed by them especially men. In retaliation, men also set up the *Ekuechi* cult to dread the women as women are made to believe that

*Ekus* who perform during *Ekuechi* are ancestor spirits raised from the dead to come and admonish, warn and punish evildoers in their songs and ritual. For men to be worried to the extent of contriving ways to checkmate women and for such contraptions to metamorphose into a festival is a clear sign that fear of women were instrumental to the evolution of the *Ekuechi* festival.

Apart from masquerade institutions and its related festivals, fear and respect of the women folk were also instrumental to the evolution of other festivals. In some cases, such festivals are related to warfare that ordinarily was the preserve of men. For instance, Orefi, (2018) argues that among the people of Lejja, an ancient iron smelting community in Enugu State, one of the major festivals, *imari Iyi ede* (contributing cocoyam for the deity), arose out of the attempt by the community to memorialise their war experience and to honour their mother deity, *Adada Nwabueze Ezema* for her role in their war of settlement. Lejja was said to have fought many wars, but the war that gave rise to this very festival was the war with Aku town. During the war, the two deities of the communities were said to have challenged each other. The contest involved rolling the human heads they had killed from their various communities in a body of water called *Adada* River. At a point, they stopped to take stock. It was then that *Ojiyi* (the deity of Aku) who had killed many Aku people realized that *Adada* (the deity of Lejja) had cheated on her by immersing cocoyam corms which it had ordered Lejja people to provide her in animal blood and was rolling same in the body of water as if they were human heads. Alaku (2017) avers that the bitterness of this war among the Aku people survives in their local saying that *ihe n'egbu Aku n'eshite Ohemuje* (what kills Aku people comes through Ohemuje- a village in Aku that share borders with Lejja.)

This very festival done in honour of *Adada* is held in the second month of the local calendar called *onwa ebo* (between the middle of June and July). On the day of this event, all married men in the community who are adherents of Igbo traditional religion cooked pounded cocoyam. The pounded cocoyams from various households were taken to the shrine of *Adada* located in every village square and offered as a sacrifice to her. Ishiwu (2018) asserts that as a rule, the eldest man in each village came to the venue of the event with four corms of uncooked cocoyam, a very healthy cock that its colour is a mixture of brown and red (*egbele awu*) and kola nut. After the breaking of kola nut, the cocoyam corms were placed at the floor of the shrine of *Adada*. The cock was slain and the blood allowed to flow freely on the cocoyam corms. As the priest guarded the flow of the blood of the cock to ensure that all the corms had blood on them, he equally pleaded with the deity (*Adada*) to ensure that the community will not be defeated in wars with any of its adversaries. As he dropped the slain cock, all the men assembled at the venue with their wives and children ensured that a portion of the pounded cocoyam and soup from their different homes were used in the worship as they carried it close to the officiating priest who took a portion and dropped same at the floor of the shrine, making sure the blood-stained corms were not covered. Once this was done, the person who brought the food is qualified to eat with his family members. The cocoyam, which is the only food used in this festival gives a lot of credence to its being gendered. Ezeogueri-Oyewole (2016) observed that the Igbo society, being mostly patriarchal, regarded yam, their most valued crop, as a male crop and this notion forced them to be the most devoted and enthusiastic yam cultivators in the world. In the face of the latter observation, the only plausible reason for using cocoyam for the event is respect for the gender of the deity, *Adada* and fear of what might befall society if another crop was used in commemorating her war exploits. They must use her 'ammunition'- cocoyam (raw corms and cocked but pounded cocoyam).

While about to exit the venue of the occasion, each family through its leader was given sand from the altar where the bloodstains of the slain cook(s) and the small lumps of pounded cocoyam mixed with soup during the sacrifice and libations by the officiating priest (the eldest man in the village—*Onyishi* who is greeted *Edoga*). According to Nwalaya (2016), on getting to the major entrance of their various compounds (*Onu mkpukpu*), the male head of each family who by right is to be in possession of the sand stood at the point the road from his family house joined with the public road. As all from his family who partook in the event and sacrifices entered the compound, he spread the sand collected from the venue of sacrifice from the left-hand side of the road to the left as he faces his compound. He would then jump over the line made by the sand he had collected at the scene of the main event and uttered the following statement:

*I and my people are free and free we shall ever remain, as I crossed the line today, so shall it be till death calls on me and them also. Let my death and that of my people not be in war front or as a result of the war. Adada, please, keep protecting me and my people always as you did to our ancestors.*

After this, he uses four seed of alligator pepper (*Ose eya*) to do some very silent incantation. At the end of the incantation, it is believed that all the evil that might befall the family had been transferred to the four alligator pepper seeds. He then uses the alligator pepper to circle his head four times, (he as the family head is in this ritual of circling his head four times with the alligator pepper symbolize the entire family) and throws them behind the line drawn with the ritualized sand making sure they fall into the gutter where they would be washed away by the flood. As they fall into the gutter, he utters a statement—*O bughi banyi*—indicating that the calamity had been carried away from him and his people. This action marks the end of the event. The logic behind these actions as enthused by Agu (2014) is anchored on the notion that as *Adada* is a river goddess, whose powers are like that of a roaring torrent, ever surging, clearing all obstacles on its path, so it clears all obstacles in the form of war that may befall the community.

However, the praise names given to the deity during the festive period points to the fact that she played a significant role in the security of the community. They extol her as *nwanyi ji igwee at'etu*—the woman who uses steel as her chewing stick, *Mma n'akpa mma*—a deity that swallows other deities. These praise names serve as a medium of arrogating mystical powers to her. Be that as it may, Ugwuogoh (2017) says that even though *Adada* is highly respected by Lejja people, Ugwele (the male deity assumed to be the husband of *Adada*) played a greater role in the consolidation of Lejja boundary with Aku. He argues that the role of Ugwele is manifest in the village that produces the chief priest of Ugwele sharing land borders with Aku. According to him, even when the chief priest of *Adada* is present at the venue of worship of *Adada*, the chief priest of Ugwele would be the first to take a share of the meat used in the sacrifice. This he justifies with the statement, *Onyeke bu Ojiroshi di nwe al*—Men are the *Newbouldia Brevis* plant that owns the land. This is a salient way of showcasing male chauvinism and downplaying the influence of women. What is imperative is that respect for *Adada* and memorialisation of her war exploits was what gave rise to the festival.

Among the Igbo who Iwuagwu (2014) observed were densely populated and are majorly agriculturists, land pressure triggered inter-group animosity resulting in conflict over land. Averting such conflicts is considered a no mean feat; hence, the respect for the peace broker-



*Adada*. More so, if one links the role of *Adada* with the observation of Dankelman and Davidson (1988) to the effect that ‘my environment is the basis of my economy and my total survival, it is from land that I get my food’, the importance of the role of *Adada* becomes clearer. Probably referring to exploits like that of *Adada*, Gloria Chuku (2005: 6-15) asserts that the flexibility and dynamism of gender constructs among the Igbo allow women to play male roles and also helped in the creation of a female hierarchy that made certain categories of women superior or inferior to others.

Kola nut (*Oji*) among the Igbo is a symbolic instrument that depicts peace, hospitality, and consensus and is invariably at the heart of all human interaction (spiritual or temporal). Little wonder Otagburuagu (2010:99) says that kola nut is strategic in the social, religious, ritual and communion observances of the Igbo. In some Igbo communities, the worship of water bodies and the associated goddess (es) forms part of their religious life. As is usual with the Igbo, any religious rite or function, especially those involving sacrifices and supplications, must, as a rule, involve the use of kola nut. However, some water goddess demands a specific brand of kola nut called *ojiugo*. In Nsukka area, *Api* of Opi, *Adada* of Lejja, *Ijoro* of Nimbo are good examples. However, the origin of this practice and why that specific type of kola nut is used has not been interrogated deeply by the people. Dieke (2016) contends that the near-white colour depicts purity and worshippers prefer using it as a way of indicating their purity of heart and sincerity of purpose before the deity. Onyioha in Onwu-otuyelu (2009:13-14) as cited in Obineche (2017) traced the origin of the use of this type of kola nut by humans to the relationship that existed in the very ancient times between men and the spirit beings. According to this account, there was a time man and the spirits involved in exchanges and interactions using the agency of sports and festivals. During one of the sporting competitions (wrestling), a spirit called *Aji Ike Ugburuoba* became another legendary Amalinze in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. He was unbeatable. His (*Aji Ike Ugburuoba*) strength fascinated a woman named *Ugo Onobo*. *Ugo Onobo* eloped with *Aji Ike Ugburuoba* to his spirit world abode at the depth of the Cross River at Okwuruike. Eventually, with the intervention of a diviner, she was found with her lover in their water abode by his two brothers. By the time she was found, she was already pregnant. Their spirit in-law out of joy gave them kola nuts; one white and one red. The red one which was said to be stained by the blood of one of the brothers of *Ugo Onobo* while trying to break it is used by humans more often as a sign that *Agala*, the brother of *Ugo*, had ‘sanctified’ it with his blood which stained it in the process of his attempt to break it. As for the white kola nut, the Igbo call it *Oji Ugo* (literarily Eagle Kola) in remembrance of *Ugo Onobo*, the first woman ever to have kola nut as her pride price. Incidentally, the general perception both in literature and oral accounts and practice is that women have nothing to do with kola nut. These views are eloquent in the works of Green (1947), Uchendu (1965). Even recently, Ihediwa, Nwashindu and Onah (2014:38-47) claims that because of the premium placed on kola nut in Igbo cosmology, women do not break kola nut except in very exceptional cases such as in Oguta by postmenopausal women. Alozie (2016) enthused that women are forbidden from climbing, planting, plucking or even breaking the kola nut for any reasons. Equally, they are not allowed to harvest the pods from the tree, although, they are allowed to process, preserve and market kola nuts after the pods have been harvested by men. If the founding of kola nut is linked to women and women are not allowed to break the nut, yet the contaminant (men) are empowered to do so, then this is cultural marginalization, though remedied by the respect accorded to white coloured kola nut.

The above account, though restricted to the Igbo, could be used to counter the biblical account which associates the introduction of sin into the world with Eve (women). If the white

kola nut that is associated with *Ugo Onobo*, a woman, is the one regarded as pure because it was not stained or contaminated. The one *Agala*, (a man) her brother, attempted to break is not given much spiritual reverence like the one associated with her sister, violation of spirituality if construed from the Igbo standpoint of the value and significance of kola nut then began with men.

Itchi, a community in Igbo-Eze South Local Government Area of Enugu State has a festival known as *Onunu*. This festival is linked to the migration of the community from Igalaland and their war experiences. According to Ayogu (2017), Itchi was believed to be established by an Igala man called *Ijalegu*. In the course of their movement out of Igalaland, they had to meet head-on with a lot of impediments, prominent among which was the hostility of Ibagwa people who claimed that the area Itchi wanted to settle was theirs. This claim by Ibagwa led to a war between the two communities. Itchi was defeated and they attributed their loss to their not being in direct possession of their war charm and other traditional paraphernalia of authority. Ugwoke (2018) postulates that Itchi people out of frustration and disillusionment sought the wise counsel of the gods through an Igala diviner. The diviner was said to have told them that for them to occupy the land under dispute, they have to make use of an item from the symbols of office of the paramount ruler of Igalaland- the *Attah*. The people were confronted with two challenges of how to actualize the seemingly impossible task. First, it was how to get back to a place that they left because of war. The second was how to get an item from the *Attah's* palace that is directly linked with his office. Ugwoke (2018) maintains that as the elders were discussing the options and possibility, a woman named *Oyioha Tashi* came up with an idea. She suggested that the royal crown of the monarch has a lot of red feathers (*awu*) attached to it and that the crown itself is loaded with magical powers. She suggested that if they should get the feather, they will be victorious. The royal crown of the *Attah* is called *Onunu-areh*. However, Itodo (2018) contends that the Igala call it *Onunu - Ere* and they ascribe a lot of mythical powers to it.

Following her suggestion, the burden became who will execute the plan bearing in mind how difficult it would be to gain access to the palace of the *Attah*, meeting with the *Attah*, before planning to touch the royal crown not to mention removing an item from it. The same *Oyioha* volunteered to try her luck. On her way to Igala, she was said to have seen a bird drenched by rainwater. The red-coloured bird was said to be *awu*. She took the bird to Idah and stayed at the gate of the *Attah*. After three native weeks( Igbo people have four days as their week in tandem with the number of market days of *Orie*, *Afor*, *Nkwo* and *Eke*), she reappeared in the community with a red feather wrapped in near dry cocoyam leaf. The elders of the community consulted diviners to confirm if what she got was actually what was needed and got an affirmative answer. What remains secret is how she made a near-impossible task possible. The exploits of *Oyioha* contradicts the observation of Bracken (2009:5) who avers that except for Helen of Troy or Joan of Arc, who led troops into war, women are generally assumed to have been sitting back at home, wringing their hands and worrying about the fate of their men in the war front or battlefield.

However, after her escapade, Itchi became victorious and occupied their present location. In commemoration of *Oyioha's* exploits, Ugwoke (2018) submits that the community instituted the *Onunu* festival to celebrate as well as re-enact the role of the red feather and the woman who brought it to ensure their victory. To that effect, the community divided the *Onunu* into two; *Onunu Tashi* which is held between January and early February and *Onunu al Itchi* which is held between July and August. Of great importance is the observation made by Ayogu (2017:21) that

during this festival “no one engages in physical combat in the town for three native weeks (12 days)”. This may be to reflect the solemn mode the community was during her search for the red feather that took twelve days interval. Equally, Ayogu (2017: 22) notes that the soup used in eating yam during the festival is derived from *Mpoto*—a flower found in some mature cocoyam stems that were collected during the three native weeks.

## Conclusion

The study of women’s contribution to society remains a very topical issue that elicits varying degrees of interest among academics. Incidentally, different scholars adopt varied approaches in a bid to understand and explicate the roles of women in societal development. However, scholars of Igbo women are yet to interrogate how the issues of fear and respect for women gave rise to festivals and how such festivals are bearers of history and great beacons that form landmarks that signpost women’s contributions to their polities. Amazingly, these cultural practices not only help in puncturing some wrong notions held about women among the Igbo of Nigeria but also expose the cowardly nature of men. Since history is not concerned with the obliteration of an inconvenient past, but with its preservation for posterity so that we learn from it, this essay undertook to see how fear and respect for the womenfolk gave rise to some cultural practices in Igboland using examples from specific Igbo communities in a bid to respond to the challenge posed by Chuku (2001:8).

What appears to be a challenge facing modern-day scholars from Igboland is the misunderstanding and purposeful misinterpretation of Igbo customs and traditions by some elders. It is trite, however, to state that men in all climes developed cosmological frame and worldviews for the singular purpose of organizing their conducts as both explain the rationale (the why, how and also the what) for their actions. As such, they evolved essential cultural tools as epitomized in festivals, rituals, rules and regulations, religious observances cum obligations and gender relations. The latter variables were discussed in this paper as they affect women and the fear and respect and cheats accorded them in different Igbo societies. For instance, it is a proven fact of history that the incarnate or spirit-being (masquerade) institution is perceived as a sphere meant for men. However, how the fear of women birthed the institution in certain communities is always ignored. The history of the Odo masquerade institution in Ukana provides a clear case of how fear of women gave rise to Odo masquerade festival in the community, even though they play marginal roles in the institution; a case of male chauvinism. As a predominantly agrarian society, the land is highly prized among the Igbo because, as Koreih (1996:5) noted, land is a scarce and inelastic commodity, and in real traditional setting women are not allowed to inherit or own land. However, the case of *Adada* of Lejja and the history of *Onunu* in Itchi depict the role played by women in the acquisition of land and the subsequent occupation, settlement and consolidation of the two communities and how respect for their escapades led to the evolution of *imari Iyi ede* and *Onunu* in both communities respectively. Very relevant also is the rationale for cocoyam being a constant in both accounts. Cocoyam, as opined by Ozoruvu Cosmas (2017), is, spiritually speaking, a tool very effective in warding off danger, especially danger emanating from witchcraft. In fact, it is a major pharmacon in the traditional medicine used in checkmating witches that were an ancient instrument of “what you *Oyibo* people call biological warfare”.

The Igbo value kola nut more than any other Nigerian ethnic nationality not for its nutritional quality or industrial purpose but because of its’ ritual significance. Among the Nsukka

Igbo group, there is a saying, as Ezema (2018) postulates, that *Ugwu ji eri eshu ji eri ebule, oji bu mmbọọ* (for any deity that would be offered a sacrifice of a cow and ram, kola nut is the first to be offered to it). More importantly, *Oji* among the Igbo is considered life as evident in the saying *Onye wetalu Oji wetalu ndu*—he who brings kola nut brings life. Life is reinforced through marriage institutions and one version of the origin of kola nut links it to *Ugo Onobo*, a woman. Yet, it is a taboo in most Igbo societies for women to break kola nut contrary to their saying that *Adighi awoo onye pitara Ose nri*—the person who brought pepper is not denied food that the pepper was used in cooking. Kola nut serves as the spices of life as food is spiced with pepper. The account of the origin of kola nut as espoused in this study may have given rise to the saying among the Igbo that *ike si na mmiri bia*—spiritual power came through water (river).

The logic of some rules attached to rituals and other regulations guiding cultural practices serves as a window through which women's contributions could be reconstructed. The three weeks of no fight in Itchi during *Onunu* festival and the use of cocoyam flower soup all depict the time *Oyioha Tashi* spent searching for the red feather from the crown of the *Attah* of Igala, and the cocoyam soup is reminiscent of the wrap used in concealing the red feather that ensured their victory. Of equal importance is that these festivals help in keeping the traditional calendar of these communities as well as in regulating human conducts. Given all these, it would be germane for more researches to be conducted into the activities of women in all societies to document their contributions to humanity. This line of research, it is hoped, would help in debunking some stereotypes bandied about women and moderate the denigration of women as it would reveal, as done in this study, that even in communities where ownership of land is restricted to men, the same land couldn't have been available if not for their women. Equally, the processes and rules undergone during the festivals portray why land is seen as a female spirit force among the Igbo. Relevant also is the opening of new vistas of research as such practices reveal the origin of some statements that ordinarily may not be known except if interrogated in the context of festivals and rituals linked to Igbo women.

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