

In most societies in pre-colonial Nigeria, the world of women was separate from that of men. The women's world was not subordinate to that of the men but rather was complementary. The political system recognized this separateness by providing that women be represented in the government of the whole society in an institutionalized manner as well as granting women autonomy in their sphere. In this system, women possessed a collective duty enhanced by the commonality of their interests: most women participated in the same type of economic system and in childbearing/rearing for which they developed a mutual support system. Colonialism undermined the solidarity of the women by introducing new divisions based on education, religion, wealth, and occupation. It deprived women of their pre-colonial authority in their sphere: to the British administration, the women chiefs were invisible. However, women maintained the forms of their old associations' even though the original functions were changed. These associations provided the primary base for mobilizing women for political action. The tradition of women protecting their interests by their actions continued.

In some Nigerian societies, there were high-status chieftaincy titles for women, generally acquired, not inherited. Although women chiefs lost their substantial political authority under colonialism, the titles regained some of their significance after independence. Just as nowadays, male politicians seek to validate their political status and influence by taking chieftaincy titles. So do women politicians take traditional titles.

Today's column provides a case study of Nigerian women and traditions in the town of Onitsha on the bank of the River Niger. In pre-colonial times, Onitsha was a very important center of trade: It was the meeting point for traders from the Niger Delta, and Igala and traders from the North. In the mid-19th century, European traders entered the scene and set up factories in Onitsha. The local markets and trade in Onitsha were completely controlled by women and they also participated actively in the long-distance trade.

Onitsha operated a constitutional monarchical system. The Obi (King) appointed a limited number of powerful chiefs, and the powers of the Obi were checked and limited by these chiefs. Wealth rather than age was the basic criterion for chieftaincy. A pre-condition for ascension to Obishop and the chieftaincy was possession of the **Ozo** title which empowered the holders to sacrifice at ancestral shrines and endowed him with spiritual authority. Ozo title holders constituted the **Agbalanze** society.

This world of the men was paralleled by that of the women. There was an **Omu** (queen) who was not the wife of the Obi, but she was handed her staff of office by the **Obi**. Once installed, the **Omu** possessed all the insignia of royalty such as the sword, fan and drum held by the **Obi**, and she could not be deposed by the **Obi**. She had her palace and throne. The **Omu** was head of the **Omu** society whose members held titles that paralleled those of the male chiefs. A precondition for ascension into the omuship and omu society was possession of the **Odu** (ivory) title, which paralleled the men's **Ozo** title. **Odu** title holders constituted the **Otu Odu** Ivory (society). Odu means ivory. The soon-to-be title holder had to purchase anklets and bracelets for late initiation, which symbolized their possession of great wealth (acquired through trade). Generally, the women find themselves financing the ivory-taking and often in turn financed the same for their daughters.

Colonialism adversely affected the power of women in Onitsha. As trade with the Europeans became more and more lucrative, Onitsha men, who had regarded trade as women's work,

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moved into the trade and displaced many women. The colonial marketing system and local councils took over the women's authority in the markets. While the colonial administration recognized the **Obi of Onitsha**, it did not recognize the **Omu**. The last **Omu**, Nwagboka, reigned from 1884 to 1886. She was one of the signatories to the treaty of 1884 between Queen Victoria and Onitsha. After her death, the Omuship lapsed and has never been restored.

However, women in Onitsha formed a new

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association of women **Ikporo** Onitsha, which has played an important role in politics within and without Onitsha (i.e. the Eastern Region, in Biafra, in East Central State and now Anambra State). At the same time, women have maintained the **Otu Odu** society and even though there is no longer the Omuship to aspire to, the Otu Odu is deeply involved in all issues which affect Onitsha and are always consulted by the Obi, the red cap chiefs, the Agbalanze, and the important age grades. The **Otu Odu** respect the shrines to two of their foremothers **Atagbusi** (who tried to stop strangers coming into Onitsha in the 1860s to take over their trade) and to Omu Nwagboku. Prominent Onitsha women who have been active in state and national public life such as Florence Emodi, Chinyere Asika and Justina Anazonwu – are all members of **Otu Odu**.

In response to social and economic change, the society has set up a domestic science training programme, which organized social services for elderly women, and has been involved in all state women and development programmes.

The Otu Odu is open to all female indigenes of Onitsha and wives of Onitsha indigenes who are 40 years of age and above. Since I am married to an Onitsha indigene and am of a "certain age" I am eligible and indeed shall be initiated into the Otu Odu on April 16th.

On that day, which marks the final ceremonies (**Mmacha** after an earlier **Ibu Ego** ceremony) at 6 a.m. I shall be ready in the house of my husband, richly dressed, (but not in the Otu Odu uniform of all white). The ivory bracelets and anklets will be looked after by my helpers until after the first ceremony. I shall dance around selected places in the village of my husband, my mother-in-law and grandmother-in-law (accompanied by a flutist and immediate female family and close friends) after which I return at 9 a.m. to prepare for the actual

initiation.

By 10a.m. I will be dressed all in white and wearing ivory anklets and bracelets. My helpers will escort me to my seat on a white-covered cloth, behind a white tablecloth where the leaders of the Otu Odu are seated. Fellow members will welcome me by donating money to me, after which we shall dance the stately regal Odu dance. I shall pay various fees, for softening the ground, for seeing off the members and for inspection of specified drinks and kola nuts. This will be followed by traditional symbolic washing off poverty and all its traces from my hands.

I dip my hands into a basin of water containing money. I will vow to be of good behavior and to defend the precepts of the society as long as I remain a member and swear I will not wear the uniform outside Onitsha unless with the permission of the society. I shall then take my title name, which I will continue to answer until death.

The title name will have been kept secret until then, so I cannot tell it to you now. At this point, I will become a full-fledged member of the **Otu Odu**. Whenever I die, all members shall attend my funeral, which will be marked by the firing of gunshots and the slaughtering of cows.

Postscripts 1: In last week's column, the punch line of the joke about the Japanese Prime Minister who tried to speak to President Clinton in the few words of English he learnt was inadvertently omitted. When Mori asked Clinton, "Who are you? Instead of "How are you?" Clinton laughingly replied, "I am Hilary's husband." The Japanese Prime Minister's reply was "**Me too.**" (missing line).

Postscript II: I hope I am not in breach of columnists' protocol but I'd like to comment on my fellow *Vanguard* columnist, Morenike Taire's column "Speaking out" on Friday, March 30. It is titled "Kafaru, the revolutionary" and provides an interesting tribute to Elizabeth Kafaru. Taire views Kafaru's revitalization of the use and understanding of traditional African herbal remedies as "revolutionary Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, who she describes as "might be remembered for a long time to come but not with ----- a lot of national pride". More caustically ----- "will be remembered for being a father who did nothing to shield his children from ----- his lifestyle -----."

These gratuitous insults to the memory of Fela, which detract from the tribute to Kafaru, are unwarranted and wrong. Fela's music made Nigeria famous and won awards globally and shall be recorded, reviewed and remembered for as long as there is music. Fela was a loving, responsible father, adored by his children. For the record, my information is based on close contact with Fela's family as a result of years of research for my biography of Fela's mother, Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti.