

Traditional Leadership Styles of the Igbo African Women: Panacea for the Values Crises in 21st Century Igboland, Nigeria

Ojel Clara Anidi

Department of English and Literary Studies,
Godfrey Okoye University, Enugu, Nigeria

Email: ojelanidi@gouni.edu.ng; Website; ojelanidi.wordpress.com

(Study accepted for publication in the book tentatively titled “Women Leadership in the 21st Century: An African Perspective”, edited by Abdulai, M., Adeola O., Mensah, A. O., Afriyie, J., Alabi, G., & Kosiba J. P. B., scheduled to be published by Routledge Taylor & Francis, in mid-2025)

Abstract

This chapter explores the traditional leadership styles of the Igbo African women, and advocates their recognition and revival for values reorientation in today’s 21st century Igboland, Nigeria. Studies suggest that the traditional Igbo women over the centuries have played major roles in nurturing moral values (shaping character in the children), and maintaining peace and progress in their communities. There is the need therefore to study exactly how these women have been able to achieve these highly valuable leadership roles in their communities. Which traditional leadership institutions and practices have they employed? This study is deemed necessary in today’s 21st century Igboland, Nigeria, and the globe, in the face of deteriorating values-system and the crises arising thereof. The study relied on the ethnography method. It was guided by the ‘Igbo African womanism theory’, adapted from the womanism theory. The findings reveal that the traditional Igbo women’s leadership styles involve the traditional institutions of family/marriage (*Ezi-na-uno*), and the lineage daughters (*Umuada* or *Ada Ndiomu*) association. Through these institutions, the women have engaged in practices such as child home-training (*izu nwa*), family care-giving (*inete ezi-na-uno*), and vigils at mourning periods (*ura ekwa*). The term, ‘Traditional Igbo Womanism Leadership Theory’, is conceptualised here to present these findings. This contributes to the significance of the study. From the findings, the traditional leadership styles of the Igbo African women need to be properly studied and revived for values reorientation in Igboland.

Keywords: Igbo African women, traditional leadership institutions, traditional leadership practices, values crisis, values reorientation, 21st-century Igboland.

1.0. Introduction

This section discusses the following topics: Background of the Study, Statement of the Problem, and Objectives of the Study.

1.1. Background of the Study

The Igbo, indigenous to southeastern Nigeria, are known for their strong institutions, communal values, rich traditions, and complex socio-political structures. Within this context, Igbo women have historically held significant leadership roles that transcend the domestic

domain. Studies, literature, history, and personal observations seem to indicate that the traditional Igbo women have served as caregivers, educators, mediators, and cultural custodians, transmitting moral values and ensuring community cohesion. Regarding the influential roles of Igbo women in traditional Igbo communities, Anidi (2018), for example, citing Ezeigbo (1998), contends that each woman's individuality is subsumed in the lives of others and an individual's problem becomes an issue that interests the whole community. The Igbo traditional society thrives in community-oriented life, and the women play an active part in bringing this about. In this regard, Onugwo (2023) reveals how the traditional Igbo women empower other women as leaders in their own families and communities, a practice which she said is deeply rooted in the Igbo culture. In the same vein, Eche (2024) also underscores the roles of the women as the children's first teacher in the informal home training. Citing Okafor (2014), Eche avers as follows:

...the responsibility of the nurturing of good morals and upbringing in the traditional homes and society was, more or less, entrusted to women. It was a woman's affair. When we consider the importance of good upbringing and good morals in every society, we then appreciate the position of women in those traditional societies" (p. 5).

One can say, in this regard, that it is the women's cumulative roles in their different homes that make their society peaceful. Ezigbo (2021) rightly describes the traditional Igbo women's leadership style as "servant leadership", embedded in humility and selflessness.

The leadership roles of the traditional Igbo women usually become most visible at crises periods, ranging from ill-health and domestic disputes to war and bereavement. At such periods, women – whether as wives, mothers, aunties, and caregivers – individually or collectively – apply indigenous conflict resolution strategies to restore harmony and uphold societal balance. A historical landmark that epitomizes the collective strength of the Igbo women is the Aba Women's Protest of 1929, known in Igbo language as *Ogu Umunwanyi*. More than a tax revolt, it was a well-organized political movement that reflected the leadership capacity of indigenous Igbo women. The Aba/ Igbo Women's War and the reforms that followed it have been described not just as a significant expression of African feminist resistance (Nwafor & Obasi, 2022), but as a prelude to the emergence of mass African nationalism (Van Allen, 1975). It has also been argued that the War was long in the making, for the colonial government in Nigeria altered the position of various Nigerian women in their societies. Apart from the fact that men and women worked collaboratively in the domestic sphere and were both recognized to have important individual roles, women held a major role in the marketplace, for instance (Matera, M., Bastia, M., & Kingsley Kent, S., 2011).

Regarding the position of Nigerian women in the precolonial era, Awe (1992) purports that there were indeed more women than men in the forefront of social, political and economic life at the pre-twentieth century Africa than in contemporary Africa. On this, she states as follows:

All these records give ample evidence of a female population that has not only been industrious and resourceful, but which has also demonstrated significant and distinguished leadership within the society. The ubiquitous market women and the energetic women farmers are pointers to their economic role. The continued existence

of women chiefs in many traditional councils and of priestesses in many indigenous cults is a testimony to their contribution in political and social spheres. (p. vii)

Awe here indicates that the precolonial Nigerian women played major leadership roles, not necessarily in the domestic but in the public domain. Some of these women include Queen Amina of Zaria, Queen Kambasa of Bonny, Iyalode Efunsetan Aniwura (Owner of Gold) of Ibadan, and the more recent Olufunmilayo Ransome-Kuti, among others. The leadership styles of these influential Nigerian women leaders need to be critically studied in contemporary times in dire need of inspirational leaders. The present paper is born out of this need. It however focuses on the traditional leadership styles of the Igbo women of Nigeria

As it was in the days leading to the Aba Women's Protest, Igboland could be said to be in a crisis situation today. This time, the crisis relates to the issue of gross values disorientation among the people. The majority of the Igbo and Nigerian people have lost a sense of their fundamental moral values. They cannot tell what is right from what is wrong. Many Nigerian parents, for example, now offer bribes so their children can score highly in examinations, and many teachers and schools aid and abet examination malpractices. Adult drug peddlers and shopkeepers, respectively, now openly sell hard drugs and alcoholic drinks to teenagers. Leaders no longer think it is wrong to divert public funds. People that struggle to make genuine contributions in the society are hardly ever recognized, while those who have money are applauded. There is general insincerity, bribery, corruption, immorality, and a get-rich quick mentality, leading to kidnapping for ransom, ritual killing, etc., among the populace.

Several scholars have decried the issue of disoriented values, and the consequent moral decadence, unwholesome behaviours, and, worst of all, the low value of human life prevalent in Igbo society today. Regarding the killings and low value of human life in present Igboland, Chimamanda Adichie, for instance, in her recent lecture during the book tour of her new book, *Dream Count*, in Enugu, Nigeria (Saturday, July 5, 2025), has lamented that Igbo people dwelling in other climes no longer feel that instinctive wholeness they used to feel while visiting Igboland. She explains that the Igbo people in diaspora are "consumed by shock, disillusionment and a feeling dangerously close to despair" on reading stories of what is now happening in Igboland. Igbo people now randomly murder other Igbo people, and are reducing women to victims of money rituals. Similarly, Agbelusi (2022) has described Igboland in contemporary times as a haven for ritual killings, commercial crime, secessionist (Biafra) agitation, kidnapping, herder-farmer clashes, attacks by unknown gunmen, and banditry. Anidi (2024), in her own part, identifies the issue of toxic masculinity in contemporary Igbo society. Toxic masculinity in this context is a situation where troubled and troubling men need therapy because of violence, and lack of engagement in family life and employment (Anidi, 2024, citing Harrington, 2020).

1.2. Statement of the Problem

A number of scholars have blamed the issue of values disorientation and the crises arising thereof in Igboland today on the weakening of maternal supervision, and advocated for a return to the traditional way of grooming children and values. Chidiebere and Nwoke (2025), for example, submit that anomalous behaviours often emerge in environments where maternal

supervision and traditional moral instruction have significantly weakened. Scholars such as Ezimora (2023) link the erosion of women's roles in moral leadership to economic hardships and the fast pace of urban living. Many women, for example, leave home early for work and return late, reducing time available for character building in their young children. In this regard, a number of the younger mothers themselves often lack firsthand exposure to traditional parenting models and crisis-time leadership practices.

Borrowing the words of Ukoko (2013), as cited in Anidi (2018): "When the world continues to witness armed conflicts, man-made famine, tragedies, forced migration and monumental abomination against our humanity, then, we should know that it is time for women to stand in the gap" ("African Women Standing in the Gap – Redefining Gender Roles in Africa"). The time has come for contemporary Igbo, Nigerian, African women to stand in the gap for their societies, as Igbo women had done over the ages. Further, as Oguike (2025) contends, any genuine societal reform must begin with the restoration of indigenous models of leadership, especially those rooted in female mentorship and moral education. The question then is: Which traditional leadership institutions/ practices have the Igbo African women historically used to instill values and resolve crises, and what promise do they hold in addressing the values disorientation crises in 21st century Igboland? While a number of studies have been carried out on the political participation of the Igbo women in democratic Nigeria, and on gender roles in the Igbo society, no other study known to the writer has conceptualized the traditional leadership styles of the Igbo African Women as done in this chapter. This makes this work necessary and relevant.

1.3. Objectives of the Study

This research is driven by the double-edged central question:

What traditional leadership practices have the Igbo African women historically used to instil moral values and foster harmony in their communities, and how can these be adapted to address present-day moral collapse and community dysfunction in Igboland, Nigeria?

Accordingly, the specific objectives include:

1. To examine the traditional leadership institutions employed by the traditional Igbo women to instil moral values and foster harmony in their communities.
2. To examine the traditional leadership practices employed by the traditional Igbo women to instil moral values and foster harmony in their communities.

2.0. Empirical Literature Review

This section is organized in the following sub-sections: Parental Absence and its Effects; Women's Leadership Roles in Igbo Society; The Role of Traditional Ceremonies in Women's Leadership; Moral Decadence and Socialization; Complementary Leadership Roles in African Families; and Summary.

2.1. Parental Absence and Its Effects

Parental absence can broadly be defined as short-term or extended absence of one or both parents in a child's home during their upbringing. Annor et al. (2024) identify the causes of parental absence as including marriage-related factors such as union dissolution, union

formation, non-marital childbearing, migration, orphanhood (parental death), and abandonment. It is estimated that between 8% and 40% of children in sub-Saharan Africa do not live with one or both parents due to these factors (Annor et al., citing Central Statistical Office (CSO) (Swaziland)). They found that adults who experienced maternal absence for one year or longer during childhood suffer poor mental health and had significantly higher hair cortisol levels, indicating stress, compared to those without such experience. Bevan and Kumari (2021) similarly highlight the multidimensional high implications of parental absence. From the foregoing, scholars have identified parental absence as an issue with dire consequences in sub-Saharan Africa.

Mukherjee (2010) reports the negative effects of increased maternal absence from home on child development, despite welfare reforms that raised labor market participation. In the same vein, in Nigeria, Nwadi, Ezeaku, and Nwakpadolu (2023) revealed that a mother's occupation often limits her ability to provide adequate care for her children's feeding, clothing, health, and education. They recommended extended maternity leave as a mitigation strategy. On the other hand, Okafor (2018) argues for the inclusion of unpaid household labour, usually done by mothers, in the national economic accounting. Recognizing such contributions would raise the status and morale of women managing the home, reinforcing the dignity of domestic leadership roles.

2.2. Women's Leadership Roles in Igbo Society

Some studies have challenged the misconception that Igbo women were politically marginalized. Oguguo and Anidobe (2020), for example, drawing on Ezeigbo (1990) and Chukwu (2009), emphasize the existence of traditional women's political institutions, including *Umuada* (daughters of the lineage), *Alutaradi* (wives of the lineage), *Isi Ada* (eldest daughter), women's age grades, and Women's title societies such as *Otu Odu*, *Ogbuefi*, and *Ogbagidi*. These institutions, according to them, conferred significant social, political, and religious authority to women members.

Also, Ezenagu (2017), citing Egboh (1987), explains that the *Umuada* are daughters born in a community but married elsewhere, who maintain disciplinary and decision-making powers within their natal communities. The *Umuada* hold a revered role as custodians of cultural heritage, maintaining peace and order within families.

Obasi and Nnamani (2015) expand on this by describing the evolution of the *Umuada Igbo* – a socio-cultural group encompassing Igbo daughters/women from all seven Igbo-speaking states and the diaspora. Their mission centers on the peace and progress of Igbo families, illustrating women's crucial leadership in conflict management and social development.

2.3. The Role of Traditional Ceremonies in Women's Leadership

Some scholars, examples, Onugwo (2023) and Ezeigbo's (2021), explore the concept of **servant leadership** within traditional Igbo women's institutions. They proffer that traditional ceremonies such as *Ime Chi*, *Omuko*, and *Omugwo* serve as rites of passage that reinforce wisdom, cultural values, and intergenerational bonds among women.

- Omuko involves imparting practical knowledge and emotional support to daughters.
- Ime Chi is a ritual of spiritual gratitude that affirms women's agency over their spiritual welfare.
- Omugwo is a postnatal care tradition where elder women, usually the mother of the new mother, provide care and support for the young mother and her family, ensuring recovery and household stability. This period typically lasts 4–8 weeks and involves numerous caregiving tasks, reinforcing women's leadership in the home.

2.4. Moral Decadence and Socialization

A few literature addressing the issue of moral decadence and value disorientation in Nigeria exist. Saa-Aondo (2019), for example, identifies family, schools, religion, and media as key agents of socialization that transmit cultural values, but laments how some of these institutions have become agents of values disorientation. For example, some schools now openly address themselves as miracle centers and promote examination malpractice.

Similarly, Adetayo (2022) investigates moral decadence among Nigerian undergraduates, finding parental negligence the primary contributor. His study urges parents to actively inculcate strong moral values to build a morally sound society.

Eche (2024) emphasizes the revered status of women in precolonial Igbo society, where the earth goddess *Ala* symbolizes the sustainer of life, paralleling the role of women. He highlights that women were entrusted with nurturing good morals and upbringing – responsibilities considered essential to societal stability. The absence or neglect of women in early child-rearing destabilizes homes and threatens children's futures.

2.5. Complementary Leadership Roles in African Families

Some literature has revealed the complementary leadership roles between the men and the women in African societies. Amaechi and Amaechi (2019), for example, arguing from a historical perspective, contend that the indigenous African socio-political and cultural structures and practices largely hinged on the complementarity of the sexes, as opposed to total male domination. The notion and practice of male domination, according to them, were largely introduced by many years of cultural impositions and borrowings that blurred the actual vision of the African past. In traditional Igbo society, adequate considerations were given to both male and female (*Oke na Nwunye*), found in all living things. For instance, there is the belief that,

...men are naturally sturdier, physically stronger, and more egoistic and therefore undertake the more arduous tasks; women are deemed to be tender, caring, persevering, and more spiritually inclined and therefore take on the less physically arduous but more morally demanding tasks. Consequently, though men apparently occupied the leadership positions in the traditional African societal arrangements, women played important religious, political, social, and economic roles that complemented those of the men”

(Amechi & Amechi, Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.14431/aw.2019.09.35.3.93>).

Ukoko (2013), in the same vein, describes traditional African family leadership as a partnership between men and women. While men welcome guests and represent the family publicly, women manage hospitality and internal affairs. Decisions within the family required women's consultation and consent, underscoring a complementary leadership dynamic rather than exclusion.

2.6. Summary

The reviewed literature underscores the critical role of women in maintaining moral values, cultural heritage, and leadership in Igbo society. While several studies have focused on the negative social consequences of parental absence and moral decline; others have focused on women's leadership roles. There remains therefore a need for an integrated understanding of how contemporary changes, such as women's increased participation outside the home, impact these traditional roles. This study thus seeks to explore the dynamics of bridging the historical cultural roles of the Igbo African women with current socio-economic realities.

It must be mentioned that there are some unfortunate drawbacks with regard to the ongoing search for cultural emancipation and resurgence in Igboland and Africa, today. While there are the obvious good sides to it, there are also the rediscovery and revival of some negative, appalling practices all being linked to the Igbo past/ culture. Examples: fetish religious practices, sometimes involving human sacrifice, female genital mutilation, or present-day show of one's naked body, particularly in the female gender, in the name of native Igbo fashion that existed when there were no clothes. Some of these practices which happened in those days were born out of ignorance or limitations of evolution, and therefore should not be revived as worthy samples in the present day. Again, due to many years of cultural impositions and borrowings from the past, one is never sure if some of these practices were actually the original, traditional, or cultural practices of the people, or if they were borrowed from other cultures along the line.

3.0. Methodology and Theoretical Framework

Two subsections are contained here: Methodology; and Theoretical Framework: 'Igbo African Womanism Theory'.

3.1. Methodology

This study relied on the ethnography method. Ethnography is a qualitative research method that involves the researcher immersing oneself in a particular culture or group to understand their way of life (Adhikari, 2023). In the ethnographic research, the researcher typically uses a variety of methods to collect data, including participant observation, interviews, and document analysis. Going by Adhikari's descriptions, the present study has employed the ethnographic design here. The present researcher had immersed herself in the Ojewe Ogene cultural clan in Udi Local Government Area of Enugu State, Igboland, Nigeria. She had engaged in personal observations, informal conversations and formal interviews with community members, particularly elderly women who have played leadership roles in their communities. She had paid attention to family structures, the organizational structure of women's groups, women's verbal expressions, symbolic practices, communal rituals, etc. She had also studied some

culture texts, including African literary writings, and primary texts on ‘Ura ekwa’ in the Ojewe Ogene clan.

The researcher held three main oral interviews. Her interviewees included: (1) Ezinne Chief Mrs. Lucy Onodugo, 83 years old, then, mother of the present researcher; (2) Her Royal Highness Nono Felicia Ukwu, a nonagenarian, wife of the late His Royal Highness Igwe Louis U. Ukwu (Agodom II of Abor), the traditional ruler of Abor, from 1993 to 2015; and (3) Ezinne Adukwulu Florence Njeze, another nonagenarian, now late. All three women were educationists, either in the formal or the informal sector. The first two women were retired principal and headmistress, respectively, and the last was an accomplished home teacher and care-giver. These women were chosen for interview because they were among the women of the Ojewe-Ogene clan known to the researcher who were able to raise responsible children – their own biological and other children in the community. The three interviews were held on 13 March 2022. Two of these women are now late, since after the interview. They are Lucy Onodugo and Florence Njeze, may their souls rest in perfect peace. Due to the word limit for this study, only a sample of the data collected could be used/ analysed. Nonetheless, in the nature of the ethnographic and interpretive methods, all the data analysed followed a thematic and narrative approach, allowing cultural meanings to surface organically.

3.2. Theoretical Framework: Igbo African Womanism Theory

The terms, ‘Igbo African womanism’, ‘Igbo womanism’, or simply ‘womanism’ (as often found in literary discourse) are used interchangeably in this study. The Igbo African womanist or Igbo womanist theory, as used in this paper, is adapted from the Africana womanism theory. It is a philosophical framework for understanding the status, identity, and roles of women as conceived by the Igbo people of Nigeria.

Before elaborating on the theory, it is essential to define the term, ‘Igbo’ or ‘the Igbo (people)’, within which context the term ‘Igbo women’ derives. The word *Igbo*, as used in this study, refers to the ethnic group known as the Igbo people, *Ndi-Igbo* (in Igbo language). They speak various dialects of the Igbo language and inhabit the area referred to as Igboland, which lies in southeastern Nigeria, east of the River Niger, with some extensions on the western bank. The Igbo are one of the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria, alongside the Hausa and Yoruba. Other ethnic groups include the Kanuri, Fulani, Ibibio, Tiv, Ijaw, Edo, Efik, Nupe, Urhobo, Ekoi, Borgu, and Ebira. Ofomata (2010) describes the Igbo as “a resilient, energetic, hardworking, enterprising and positively individualistic group of people, [who] live in Southeastern Nigeria” (p. 1). Based on the preliminary results of Nigeria’s 2006 Population Census, Ofomata reveals that Igboland covers an area of approximately 41,000 square kilometers, with a population of 22,926,340 people. This results in a population density of about 559 persons per square kilometer, making Igboland more populous than 172 countries globally and fewer only than 48 within Africa. It is more populous than 46 countries and fewer than 10. These figures exclude the significant Igbo diaspora residing in other parts of Nigeria, neighboring African nations, and virtually every region of the world (Ofomata, 2010). From the foregoing therefore, the term, “Igbo African women”, specifically refers to adult females from the Igbo ethnic group in Nigeria, West Africa.

The Igbo African womanism theory aligns with the broader concept of Africana womanism, a movement pioneered in the late 1980s by Black women in the United States, especially Clenora Hudson-Weems. Africana womanism draws inspiration from African traditions of womanhood and places the African woman at the center of cultural preservation and social responsibility. Dove (1998) defines Africana womanism as a theoretical concept emphasizing the role of African women in “regaining, reconstructing, and creating cultural integrity that espouses ancient Maatic principles of reciprocity, balance, harmony, justice, truth, righteousness, and order.”

This theory highlights the resourcefulness and self-reliance of African women and their cooperative partnership, rather than conflict or competition, with men (Anidi, 2014). For the Africana womanist, the family unit is of paramount importance. Hudson-Weems (2001) notably posits that “while feminism is female-centered, Africana womanism is family-centered” (pp. 138-139). Many African women have embraced Africana womanism as a model of feminism better suited to African realities. It is integrative rather than antagonistic, emphasizing collaboration with men. Igbo womanism is a natural offshoot of this ideology. It recognizes both the potential of women and the importance of male support within the family and community systems.

Nevertheless, womanism as a concept has been critiqued for focusing primarily on issues faced by African women in the confrontation with culture and colonial legacies. In response, scholars have formulated other women-related theories. For example, Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie advanced Stiwanism, an acronym for Social Transformation Including Women of Africa. This ideology promotes female empowerment and without alienating men or African traditions. According to Ezeani (2020), Stiwanism encourages women to take on financial responsibilities as a prerequisite for gender equality. Other notable theoretical frameworks that have emerged from African feminist discourse include:

- Motherism (Acholonu, 1995): Entrusting women, especially rural women, with the nurturing and development of society.
- Nego-feminism (Nnaemeka, 2003): A negotiation-based feminism that embraces compromise and communal progress.
- Snail-sense feminism (Ezeigbo, 2012): Emphasizing patience, pragmatism, and gradual progress in gender relations.

All these models rest on the triadic foundation of gender inclusion, complementarity, and collaboration, reinforcing their connections to the core tenets of African womanism.

4.0. Findings: The Traditional Igbo Womanism Leadership Theory

The findings of this study are discussed using the theory of the Traditional Igbo Womanism Leadership, as conceptualized here. The theory is grounded in the ‘Igbo African Womanism Theory’, as discussed in the preceding subsection on ‘Theoretical Framework’. The findings and formulation of this theory are based on the study’s objectives/ questions, which include: (1) Which traditional leadership institutions are employed by the traditional Igbo women to instil moral values and foster harmony in their communities? and (2) What traditional

leadership practices are employed by the traditional Igbo women to instil moral values and build character and foster social harmony in their communities?

Answer to Research Question 1:

4.1. The Traditional Leadership Institutions Employed by Traditional Igbo Women

The traditional institutions employed by the traditional Igbo women to instil moral values and foster social harmony in their communities include: (1) The family/ marriage (*Ezi-na-uno*), and (2) The Daughters of the Lineage (*Ada Ndiomu* or *Umuada*) association.

1. The Family/Marriage (*Ezi-na-uno*) Institution

Marriage in Igbo society transcends the union of individuals. It is a communal contract uniting families, clans, and entire communities. The family structure serves as an informal home-school in morality, entrepreneurship, and cultural values. The women whether as mothers, grandmothers, aunts, sisters, or nannies play central roles in this home schooling/ training. As such, a very high premium is given to the training of the girl-child at home to prepare her for the central position she will occupy in home training and care-giving. This early girl-child education prepares the girl not just for roles within the home but for challenges in life, including physical, reproductive, and social hurdles. Recognizing the burdens of menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, and caregiving, traditional Igbo society – with guidance from women elders – ensures rigorous character and leadership training for the girl-child from an early age.

Yet there is complementarity between the leadership roles of the women and those of the men in the typical Igbo family. In this regard, Ezinne Chief Mrs. Lucy Onodugo, in the researcher's interview with her, believes that every man or woman must consider this important concept of complementarity before making a choice of a wife or a husband. Each person's weaknesses, for example, must be supplemented, to a large extent, by the other person's strengths, and vice-versa. Lucy Onodugo further states that there is no marriage or home without the woman; hence, the choice of a good marriage partner is very crucial to the man and his family. Amechi & Amechi (2019) as cited earlier have explored the complementarity of roles between the man and the woman in the Igbo marriage/ family.

2. The Daughters of the Lineage (*Ada Ndiomu/Umuada*) Association Institution

The Daughters of the Lineage (*Ada Ndiomu/ Umuada*) Association in Igboland is a sociocultural and political institution for women, enabling collective action for community welfare (Oguguo & Anidobe, 2020). *Ada Ndiomu* is the dialectical variant used in the Ojewe-Ogene clan of Igboland. In traditional Igbo society, every adult woman is affiliated with at least two associations: one in her natal home (the *Umuada/ Daughters of the Lineage Association*), and the other in her marital home (*Ndiomu Nwunyedi/ Wives of the Lineage Association*), respectively. It should be noted that the Igbo society is patrilineal; hence, the wives of the lineage are wives and mothers (the elderly wives) of the *Umunna* (male members of the lineage), while the daughters of the lineage are aunts, sisters, and children of the *Umunna*. The *Umuada* usually remain socially and politically connected to their birth communities even after marriage. This group often exerts significant influence in dispute resolution, family

matters, and crisis management. The Umuada association in Igboland has evolved from the different small groups of women (daughters of the lineage women groups) in the different communities to larger groups of women/ daughters who trace their ancestry (usually paternal) to a particular town, clan, local government, or state. At present, there is the Pan-Igbo Umuada association known as ‘Umuada Igbo’. This association embraces all daughters of Igboland, from the seven Igbo speaking states of Anambra, Imo, Enugu, Ebonyi, Abia, Delta and Rivers, including Igbo daughters in Diaspora. Any Igbo daughter is free to register in this Pan-Igbo Umuada association. Generally, the Umuada /Ada Ndiomu Association, whether it is composed of a few kindred daughters or large numbers of daughters from one town, clan, state, or the entire Igboland (as seen in the ‘Umuada Igbo’) depicts the typical Igbo communal living, with an emphasis on shared responsibility and collective well-being.

The institutions of the ezi-na-uno (family/ marriage) and Ada Ndiomu (Lineage Daughters) have been so effective that several scholars as seen above have contested the claim that Igbo women were politically marginalized in traditional society. The present study affirms these views by examining three traditional leadership practices employed by the traditional Igbo women using these institutions in their communities.

Answer to Research Question 2:

4.2.The Traditional Leadership Practices of the Traditional Igbo Women

The traditional leadership practices employed by the traditional Igbo women to instil moral values and foster social harmony in their communities include: (1) Child home-training (*Izu nwa*); (2) Family care-giving (inete ezi-na-uno); and (3) vigil at mourning periods (*ura ekwa*).

1. Child Home-Training (*Izu Nwa*)

Home-training here refers to the informal education mainly made up of indigenous knowledge, values, and life skills inculcated into the child from early childhood. The home-training of children, beginning from birth, is the responsibility of the parents. The mothers particularly play a crucial role in the training, because children spend much of their formative years with them. For this reason, the traditional Igbo society place a high premium in the training of the girl-child because she will grow up to become a mother who will in turn train her own children – both the males and the females. The mothers cannot give what they do not have; hence, the statement: “Train a woman and you train the nation”. Children are most times the photocopy of the person who trained them.

Storytelling or folktales and proverbs are major tools used for home training. Through these tools, the values of character, respect, hard work, and industry, as well as the appreciation of the indigenous oral arts and knowledge, are inculcated into the Igbo child (Anidi, unpublished). Folktales are anonymous, timeless tales transmitted orally among a people. From observations, and the data collected from the interviews conducted by the researcher, it is gathered that, in the Ojewe-Ogene clan, women after cooking food in the evenings usually come to the nkolo (the homestead sitting room) with the children for folktales. While the women would be grating and processing the cassava noodles, commonly known as abacha or ogodo (some of which

would be prepared the following morning for breakfast), the folktales would be going on. The family usually took turns to tell the stories. The style of telling the story including the music/lyrics that were used to tell some parts of the story, as the case may be, all added to the entertainment. After each story, the morals of the story would follow. Everybody participated in pointing out the morals. The young and old learnt a lot from the stories and their morals. Usually, proverbs are used to spice up the stories. Apart from storytelling, proverbs are also used in the continuous teaching, instructions, practical examples, reprimands, and praises, given by the mothers to the children. Proverbs are wise sayings which summarize the philosophies of a people. Among the Igbo, proverbs are called “ilu” or “ilu okwu”. Proverbs as a concept are similar to idioms, though the two are not quite the same. Both the proverbs and the idioms communicate ideas indirectly, but while idioms may not necessarily be wise sayings, proverbs on the other hand are wise sayings – concentrated wisdom of a people.

Nneoma Mrs. Florence Njeze, a nonagenarian and traditional home keeper who never took up an office / civil servant job all through her active years, though she was married to a ‘big man’, one of the Africans who managed some sections of the Enugu Collieries, in her interview with the researcher revealed that in those days every member of the family, including the elder men, sometimes, gather together in the evening to tell stories, fictional and real-life. At the cold harmattan seasons, there was usually a fire made at the centre of the sitting room, so that people could sit around the fire warming themselves as they shared stories. In this way, story-telling was not only a civilizing agent, it was also a special binding force for the entire family. It created an opportunity for relaxation, socialization, and helped to foster unity and peace.

Regarding the role of the mother in home training, Nduka and Ozioma (2019) posit that mothers are the nursery and primary teachers of their children. Their teaching often done through oral storytelling, serves as both moral instruction and cultural education. Also, Achebe (1958) in his novel, *Things Fall Apart*, illustrates this tradition. He notes that “low voices, broken now and again by singing, reached Okonkwo from his wives’ huts as each woman and her children told folk stories” (p. 76). Similarly, Anidi (2014) observes that mothers always strive to bring up their daughters and sons with positive norms and ethos (proper behaviour and ethos of society) to lay the foundation for a healthy and confident society. Within the Igbo communal ecosystem, the women through home training, including storytelling and proverbs, were able to transmit cultural values and build strong characters in the children.

2. Family Care-Giving (*Inete Ezi-na-unu*)

Family care-giving is another important practice carried out by traditional Igbo women leaders in the family. Both the young and the adult children including the husband and other elders in the family receive care from the women. One important aspect of this care-giving entails getting, processing, and preparing the food for the entire household, with or without the help of the men or the children in the household. Her Royal Highness Nono Felicia Ukwu confirmed this (Oral interview, March 13, 2022). On the question of the leadership practices of the typical traditional Igbo African woman, as reflected in her duties in her marital home, HRH revealed that the traditional African women of old performed herculean tasks in their families. She cited the example of her own mother, Nwakeaku Chibuzo (nee Offia), who used to trek from Abor

to Egede, a distance of about 12 kilometers, to sell and buy food items, carrying them on her head, to and fro. Felicia Ukwu remembered those days how she along with some of her siblings, by evening time, when their mother was expected home, would stroll out to the outskirts of the hamlet/ village waiting for their mother's return. On sighting her, they would rush to welcome her and to take some of her loads – the foodstuffs and other house items she bought, which she had been carrying on her head. Their coming out to wait for her at the outskirts of their hamlet was to give her some relief from her load before she got home. Once inside the house, her children would help her to massage her feet, legs, neck, arms, and hands using *ufie* (camwood), which were believed to have a calming effect on strained nerves, stretched by the long-distance trek as well as the usually heavy load carried. After allowing herself to calm down a bit, her mother, as her HRH narrated, would then be ready to prepare the family dinner with some of the things she bought. From the interview, it is further revealed that the traditional Igbo women worked hard to make some savings towards fulfilling not only economic but religious family obligations. These selfless services performed by the interviewee's mother, as narrated, are evidences of family care-giving which is also an instance of servant leadership seen in traditional women leaders.

3. Vigil at Mourning Periods (*Ura Ekwa*)

One of the key communal practices of the traditional Igbo women, usually using the auspices of the Lineage Daughters (Umuada/ Ada Ndiomu) association, is the organising of vigils during mourning periods (*ura ekwa*). When there is a death/ burial in the lineage, these women gather to console and give emotional support to the immediate family members of the bereaved, and also to one another who are themselves relatives of the dead person. This practice is common among the Ojewe-Ogene Igbo communities of Enugu State. The *ura ekwa* serves to console mourning families through poetry, dance, food, and cultural expression. Ugwu (2014) defines *ura ekwa* as: "The period in which relatives and friends gather at the bereaved family's compound to be with them in vigil as they go through the stages of loss" (p. 8). Traditionally, *ura ekwa* could last four to nine native weeks (16–36 days). It has now reduced to about two days in most communities of Ojewe-Ogene.

Though *ura ekwa* is born out of a vicissitude (death), it usually turns out as a meeting point for the female members of the lineage who are married close by or far away from the family homestead. It acts as family reunion for not only the female but for both the male and female relatives of the family or lineage. In addition, the *ura ekwa* is accompanied by forms of entertainment – in the music, poetry, dance, culture, and food made available. As Egudu (2015) explains: "If we are asked here if there is anything good about death, we will answer 'yes'.... Our 'yes' is predicated firmly on the aesthetics of death and burial, especially the artistry and philosophy of poetic expressions about them... to delight and console" (p. 6).

During *ura ekwa*, the Umuada sing, dance, tell stories, and are sustained by *nri-ekwa* – food offerings such as goat, pig, or cow, tubers of yam, and condiments offered by relatives and friends of the family, including the families of some members of the Umuada themselves. When a cow is slaughtered, meat is often distributed to the Umuada to take home. Sometimes, the Umuada would make some other demands on the bereaved family, and insist that such

demands be met. Ugwu (2014) has argued that the Umuada demands are made for two main reasons: first, to actually incite an argument that will distract the bereaved family from concentrating on its loss as they engage in thinking of a solution to an almost non-existent problem; and second, to actually punish the bereaved family if it happens that in the judgement of the Umuada the deceased was not appropriately cared for by the family while s/he was alive. The *ura ekwa* events, championed by the Umuada, are based on the philosophies of comforting of a bereaved family, in realization that death is ever present and can never be banished. Through activities such as this, the Umuada association serves as vital platforms for social support and community organization.

5.1. Discussion of Findings

An attempt has been made above to conceptualise the ‘Traditional Igbo Womanism Leadership Theory’, to encapsulate the findings of this study. This theory highlights the leadership institutions and practices historically used by the traditional Igbo women in nurturing moral values, building character in the children, managing vicissitudes, and fostering communal peace, harmony, and progress. This leadership style is exercised primarily through two traditional institutions: the family/ marriage (*Ezi-na-ulo*), and the Lineage Daughters (*Umuada /Ada Ndiomu*) association. It encompasses practices such as child home-training, family care-giving, and vigil at mourning periods.

The findings of this study confirm that the traditional Igbo women function as informal educators, care-givers, peacekeepers, and leaders in both the domestic and public spaces in their societies. These findings agree with Eche’s (2024), Ezigbo’s (2021), and Ugwu & Obioma’s (2024) ideas, as cited earlier, that the traditional Igbo women’s roles centre on moral instruction and cooperative governance, and prioritise humility, selflessness, and proactive intervention. Consequently, this study argues for the recognition of the traditional Igbo women leadership theory as a viable theoretical lens which needs to be further studied and developed in contemporary leadership discourse, particularly in these times of values/ moral decline, and social breakdown in Igboland.

5.2. Conclusion

In the present 21st century Igboland, increasingly plagued by disoriented values, moral decline, and other accompanying crises – get-rich-quick syndrome, kidnap for ransom, ritual murders, corruption, and various forms of malpractices – there is an urgent need for women, being key educators of their children and community (cumulatively), to embrace the traditional Igbo womanism style of leadership, which, though subtle, has long served as stabilizing forces in traditional Igbo families and communities.

5.3. Lessons for Today

1. There is a pressing need to properly study, document, and revive the traditional leadership styles – institutions and practices – of the traditional Igbo women. These systems should be studied not as relics of the past, but as living structures that can offer moral guidance and foster peace and social harmony in the present Igboland, Nigeria, and the globe in the face of disoriented values systems.

2. As Okafor (2018) has argued, the government and the appropriate authorities in society should work towards including the unpaid household labour, usually done by mothers, in the national economic accounting. Recognizing such contributions would raise the status and morale of women leaders managing the home front, reinforcing the dignity of domestic leadership roles.
3. Cultural and leadership education at the community and school levels should include the traditional Igbo womanist leadership styles/ practices. This will help the younger generation appreciate indigenous values and uphold them.
4. Local and state governments in Igboland should engage traditional women leaders in community development and conflict mediation efforts. Their involvement can help restore trust, fairness, and communal ethics.

References

- Achebe, C. (1958, 1986). *Things fall apart*. Essex: Heinemann, & British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data.
- Acholonu, C. O. (1995). *Motherism: The Afrocentric alternative to feminism*. Afa Publications.
- Adetayo, F. (2022). Moral decadence among Nigerian undergraduates: Causes and remedies. *Nigerian Journal of Social Issues*, 14(2), 102–115.
- Adhikari, E. D. (2023). Ethnography as a research method: A critique. Retrieved from ResearchGate. DOI: 10.35542/osf.io/t86uc
- Agbelusi, S. (2022, 6 June). Insecurity: A norm in Nigeria. *The Cable*. Retrieved August 20, 2022, from [Thecable.ng/security-a-norm-in-nigeria](https://thecable.ng/security-a-norm-in-nigeria)
- Amaechi, C. M., & Amaechi, E. U. (2019). Pre-colonial African gender cosmology and the gender equality nexus: “The road not taken” in Igboland, Nigeria. *Asian Women*, 35(3), 93-113). Retrieved July 2, 2025 from <https://doi.org/10.14431/aw.2019.09.35.3.93>.
- Anidi, O. C. (2024). Flora Nwapa’s *Efuru* and toxic masculinity in Igbo Nigerian society. *Social Sciences and Humanities Open*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2024.101055>.
- Anidi, O. C. (2018). Women empowerment for sustainable national development in Nigeria: Lessons from Flora Nwapa’s *Efuru*.” *IMT International Journal of the Arts and Sciences IJOTAS* 3(1), 23-39.
- Anidi, O. C. (2014). Womanhood and peace-building in Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun* and Nwapa’s *Never Again*. *Journal of ANWAD*, 2(1), 112-123.
- Annor, F., Agbozo, F., Mensah, K. A., & Yeboah, J. (2024). Parental absence as an adverse childhood experience among young adults in sub-Saharan Africa. *African Journal of Child Development Studies*, 9(2), 115–132.
- Awe, B. (1992). *Nigerian women in historical perspective*. Ibadan: Sankore Publishers Ltd. & Bookcraft Ltd
- Bevan, C., & Kumari, M. (2021). Exploring the dimensions of parental absence. *Journal of Childhood Development*, 12(3), 76–89.
- Chidiebere, E., & Nwoke, J. (2025). Youth delinquency and the erosion of maternal supervision in Southeastern Nigeria. *Nigerian Journal of Moral and Social Studies*, 12(1), 88–104.

- Chukwu, G. (2009). *Igbo women and political power: Historical perspectives*. Lagos: University Press.
- Dove, N. (1998). Africana womanism: A theoretical framework for women of African descent. *The Black Scholar*, 28(1), 11–18.
- Eche, I. O. (2024). Moral mothering and the social future of the Igbo child. *Journal of African Indigenous Ethics*, 11(2), 67–83.
- Egudu, R. N. (2015). *Aesthetics of Igbo funeral poetry*. Nsukka: University of Nigeria Press.
- Ezeani, E. (2020). Rethinking African feminism: The relevance of Stiwanism in Nigeria's socio-political context. *African Studies Review*, 63(1), 78–94.
- Ezeigbo, T. A. (2012). Snail-sense feminism: Building on an indigenous model. *Journal of African Gender Studies*, 6(1), 12–27.
- Ezeigbo, T. (2021). Women's rites and servant leadership in Igbo ceremonial traditions. *Journal of African Women and Culture*, 19(2), 101–118.
- Ezenagu, N. (2017). Umuada and social justice in Igbo society: A gendered reading. *African Cultural Review*, 22(3), 201–218.
- Ezimora, I. (2023). Urban motherhood and the collapse of indigenous parenting in Igbo culture. *Nsukka Journal of African Studies*, 8(1), 49–63.
- Hudson-Weems, C. (2001). Africana womanism: The flip side of a coin. In R. Terborg-Penn (Ed.), *Women in Africa and the African diaspora* (pp. 138–139). Howard University Press.
- Matera, M., Bastia, M., Kingsley Kent, S. (2011). *The Women's War of 1929: Gender and Violence in Colonial Nigeria*. Basingstoke, United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan
- Mukherjee, A. (2010). Maternal labor market participation and its impact on parenting. *Journal of Child Development and Welfare Policy*, 14(1), 33–47.
- Nduka, A., & Ozioma, E. (2019). Mothers as moral educators in Igbo traditional society. *International Journal of African Culture and Ethics*, 4(1), 55–66.
- Nnaemeka, O. (2003). Nego-feminism: Theorizing, practicing, and pruning Africa's way. *Signs*, 29(2), 357–385.
- Nwadi, C., Ezeaku, I., & Nwakpadolu, S. (2023). The impact of maternal employment on child care in Nigerian households. *African Journal of Family Life and Development*, 10(3), 75–90.
- Nwafor, C., & Obasi, V. (2022). Rethinking the Aba Women's Protest of 1929: A feminist perspective. *African Historical Studies*, 13(1), 20–39.
- Obasi, F., & Nnamani, K. (2015). Umuada Igbo and conflict resolution in traditional society. *Nigerian Sociocultural Research Review*, 3(1), 22–38.
- Ofomata, G. E. K. (2010). The Igbo (Ndigbo): Vision, mission and the hereafter of a survey of the Igbo nation project: In G. E. K. Ofomata, & P. C. Uwazurike (Eds.) *A Survey of the Igbo Nation*, 2 (pp.1-23). New York: Triatlantic Books.
- Oguguo, C., & Anidobe, C. (2020). Debunking myths of women's marginalization in Igbo political structures. *Gender and African Studies Review*, 8(3), 112–130.
- Oguike, A. (2025). Restoring indigenous female mentorship in Nigeria: A leadership imperative. *Journal of Indigenous Knowledge and Development*, 12(1), 44–58.
- Okafor, F. C. (2018). Recognizing unpaid household labor in Nigeria's economy. *Journal of*

- African Economic Studies*, 10(1), 91–106.
- Onugwo, A. (2023). Ceremonial leadership and moral transmission in Igbo women's traditions. *African Women's Heritage Journal*, 9(1), 70–85.
- Saa-Aondo, T. (2019). Value disorientation and moral collapse in Nigeria: The role of miracle centers. *Journal of Social and Moral Education*, 4(1), 60–75.
- Ugwu, M. C. (2014). *Igbo funeral rites and the concept of Ura Ekwa*. Enugu: Chinonso Press.
- Ugwu, M., & Obioma, L. (2024). Women as moral educators in traditional Igbo society: An empirical study. *Igbo Cultural Research Journal*, 15(2), 98–115.
- Ukoko, M. U. (2013). Complementarity in traditional Igbo family leadership. *African Journal of Gender and Culture*, 9(1), 33–47.
- Van Allen, J. (1975). Aba Riots or the Igbo Women's War? - Ideology, Stratification and the Invisibility of Women. *Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies* 6.1.