

## Gender, Space and Power in the Indigenous Igbo Socio-political Organization

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**Abstract:** This study examines the indigenous Igbo society with the purpose of identifying the complexities of gender relations in the socio-political space. It locates men and women's positions in the socio-political organization and identifies how power is implicated in the interrelationships that exist. The study argues that power is complex, elusive and hence noted the varied forms its possession and enforcement may assume in Igbo socio-political space. Hence, power is not concentrated on an individual or group but diffused within the body polity. Space conceptualized both spatially and as a process, represents the venue and means of negotiating and accessing power, respectively for men and women. The study, therefore is a contribution to the critique of the thesis of women invisibility that dominated earlier studies of the Igbo people and underscores what the researcher believes to be a factual representation of men and women in the socio-political maze. Finally, the study concludes that collaboration and gender mutuality characterize the indigenous Igbo society.

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**Key words:** Igbo society, socio political space, Igbo life, gender, power, socio-political organization

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### INTRODUCTION

A lot has been written on the indigenous Igbo socio-political organization describing it as stateless or segmentary, egalitarian, gerontocratic, patriarchal and so on (Ilogu, 1974; Basden, 1938; Onwuejiegwu, 1981). Evident in these researches are attempts to analyze the political life of the Igbo traditional society. In this regard, most of such works focus on the political structure with particular reference to such units as the family, patrilineage, village and village group with little attention given to the position of women in social maze from where they derive their power. If the status of women is treated at all, such issue is given peripheral attention in these descriptions. Few other studies that try to look at the position of women in the indigenous Igbo society do this in isolation of the position of men in the Igbo socio-political space. This is the basis of feminist research. Thus, feminist studies tend to lay emphasis on women at the expense of men and in this regard lacks a balance scale where gender relations can be weighed that is a platform to project the overall picture. It is in the light of this that gender research has become more acceptable because of its comprehensive nature as both men and women are brought into focus. This study focuses on gender and the socio-political organization of the Igbo indigenous society: the nature of the Igbo traditional society, descent system and their implications on power relations between men and women in Igbo life. It explores such questions as: How are men and women represented

in the socio-political maze and does such representation translates into accessibility to power for either of the sexes? In what forms does the Igbo kinship system for instance, empower men and women in the culture in space utilization? In what form does the position of men and women in the Igbo kinship system for instance, constitute space for power negotiation for the sexes? What role does gender play in group and intergroup relations in the kinship network? In addressing these questions this study hopes to give an analysis of Igbo socio-political organization and its gendered implications. In pursuance of this subject matter, the gap created by the earlier studies is expected to be bridged. The study, therefore, demonstrates that cooperation and mutual dependence are the *modus operandi* of the indigenous Igbo socio-political life.

### THE NATURE OF THE INDIGENOUS IGBO POLITICAL STRUCTURE

In Igboland, there are thousands of autonomous communities or towns (village group), known as *obodo*; or *mba*, each run by a paramount leader known as *eze* or *igwe* as the case may be. It should be noted that the idea of paramount chief that cuts across all Igbo societies today is a legacy of European contact, as there was nothing like paramount chiefs in pre-colonial period. Cases of monarchical system could only be found in few places like Onitsha, Oguta, Osomari, Asaba, Arochuku and Agbor (Kalu, 1993). The village group is the highest

political unit of the Igbo traditional society. Each of these towns is segmented into smaller groups known as villages. The villages are in turn, segmented into umunna (patrilineage or literally meaning children of the same father). The umunna is the central and the most influential and the basic socio-political unit of the Igbo indigenous society. It comprises of the descendants in the male line of founder ancestor by whose name the patrilineage is sometimes called. The writer of this study, for instance, belong to the Umuezeagbanari patrilineage in her natal home. Umuezeagbanari means the children of Agbanari or the descendants of Agbanari. The umunna has been explained as:

The catalyst of Igbo political behaviour and attitudes, the main controlling factor that regulates and conditions an Igbo citizen. It is the authority and reason for political and social participation in the Igbo town-state government (Njaka 1974)

The umunna is a corporate group which holds allegiance to an ancestor father, one shrine and a common obi (a large open square where the patrilineage members meet to attend to issues of common interest to the group). It is an exogamous group and there is no intermarriage among members of the same umunna. However in situations where the lineage has become very large, indeed, the members may begin to marry but it must be those without any close blood tie. In situations like this, sooner than later, some groups within the patrilineage may separate themselves from the larger body to found a new patrilineage. For example, about three decades ago in Nanka community, southeastern Nigeria, a new patrilineage, Umuezeike (children of Ezeike), emerged from the Umuezeagbanari patrilineage. Hence, the beginning of a new patrilineage.

The umunna is again divided into umunne (literally meaning children of the same mother) that is the extended families who cannot under any reason inter marry, otherwise the individuals involved are accused of committing incest which is an abomination described as alu or aru ala or nso ala. The members of umunne are closely related blood-wise and the founding father is traceable within ten generations. The position the umunne occupies in the Igbo political arrangement underscores the significance of the position of the woman in the culture of the people. Motherhood is perceived as a binding force in intra-group relations. To the matrilineal people of Ohafia, for instance, father's penis scatters, mother's womb gathers (Nsugbe, 1974). For this reason a person is never rejected in the mother's patrilineage. In Igbo culture, when a man has a serious problem with his people he escapes to his mother's patrilineage where he

finds solace in times of trouble. He is never rejected. The family as the domestic organization is made up of the man, his wives, children and his sons wives. With time these sons, except the first son known as okpala move out of the compound to establish their individual compounds. While the family head resides at the obi which is located at the centre of the compound, the wives residence are located as corporate buildings within the compound each structured as an enclosure where each wife and her children reside. The political implications of this household arrangement will be examined under the section Space and Power in the Indigenous Igbo Society.

A cluster of hamlets made up of compounds whose occupants are members of various patrilineages form the village. This is simply a geographical unit providing some considerable solidarity based on neighbourhood rather than an immediate blood relationship (Olisa, 1971). Among the Northern Igbo people for instance, settlement is based on patrilineage relationships as members of the same extended family tend to reside closer to one another than with members of other unrelated patrilineages. The reason for this is traceable to the fact that each nuclear family shares its landed property which is usually a large expanse of land among the male children. As residence is patrilocal, ultimately members of the same umunna reside closer to one another than to those of other patrilineages. The network of social relationships established through blood bond and daily interactions nurtures closer ties among kin groups and further ensures support from kinsmen and women. For the Igbo people, obligation whether in cash or kind is a significant part of social relationships within kin network. Hence, support to one's kin is an essential obligation.

Every Igbo town jealously cherishes and maintains a high degree of autonomy and therefore behaves as a self-contained entity in carrying out her internal affairs and in her general relationships with her neighbouring communities. Prior to colonial contact, the council of elders who are mostly nze na ozo titleholders exercised authority and leadership at the village-group level. These people are freeborn that is they are neither osu (social outcasts) nor slaves. They were the elites of Igbo traditional society. They directed discussions and summarized decisions in the assembly of the whole village-group and carried out other socio-political activities like settlement of disputes. Today in most indigenous Igbo traditional society for instance among the Nanka people of southeastern Nigeria, nze na ozo titleholders are the custodians of the customs and traditions of the people while some of their former roles have been taken over by the traditional leader and his cabinet members and the town union executives. This new

development often leads to contestations of power between the town leader (eze or igwe) and the town union executives, two political structures that are products of colonial contact and urbanization, respectively.

From the umunna (patrilineage) level down to the extended family umunne, the okpara or okpala (first son who is usually the eldest in the patrilineage) of the relevant component family units occupies a leadership position. His leadership is based on his being the oldest man in this patrilineage. He is thus, the living representative of the ancestors and the holder of the ofo (symbol of authority and justice made up of a stick of *Detarium Senegalense* or pieces of it tied together) of the unit that he leads. While men hold the ofo the women are assumed to hold the ogu which is supposed to be the feminine symbol of justice. Thus, a woman may swear with ogu. This does not imply that a woman cannot swear with ofo or vice versa. The issue is that while ofo is assumed to be masculine and can only be in the possession of the man, ogu is assumed to be feminine. In most societies in Igbo land, the ogu has no physical symbol but is verbally expressed. For instance, one could say *Eji M ofo na ogu* (I am holding ofo and ogu) without physically holding either ofo or ogu. Although the okpala occupies a leadership position, his leadership is essentially a moral one as a result he cannot take any decision alone nor enforce the decisions taken by his people with any force or coercion. He plays the role of the coordinator of the affairs of general interest in the family unit he belongs. Similarly, the okpala position is vested with a lot of other responsibilities such as presiding over the sharing of landed property of a member of the patrilineage being the chief host in traditional marriage ceremonies in the unit that he leads, among responsibilities. Every umunna (patrilineage) has its own square called *obi*, which functions as a meeting venue and also the residence of the okpala or okpara of the founding father of the patrilineage. At the death of the okpala, the most senior in the relevant sub-unit succeeds him. This could be the brother or cousin but definitely not his son.

Within the socio-political organization in patrilineal Igbo society, women institution of *umuada* (institution for daughters both married, unmarried, divorced or widowed) constitutes a veritable body for women to access both social and political powers. Their decisions are final in conflict situations as they function as the watch dog of public morality. Indeed, the women have different assemblies of their own which correspond with different units that make up Igbo socio-political structure. For instance, each umunne (extended family), umunna (patrilineage), village and village-group has parallel women's groups and associations. In their meetings, the

women address issues affecting the women in particular and the community at large for the common good of all. For instance, the *umuada* share to a great extent in the social life of their natal homes when married. The system of exogamy as practiced in most Igbo societies ensures that a woman marries outside her patrilineage in the patrilineal Igbo society but outside the matrilineage among the matrilineal Cross River Igbo.

The other institutions in the Igbo socio-political structure such as the age grades and title associations, *nze na ozo* title society are not kinship based. The *nze na ozo* title society is a village-based group whose membership is by choice and the ability to meet the criteria for membership. It is important to note that among the matrilineal Ohafia Igbo the regulation of political relations in the village is the responsibility of age-based associations. These age-based associations for male members of the society include *uke*, *ukejiogo*, *akpan*, *umuaka* and *ndi ichin* (Nsugbe, 1974). Through the principle of age and selection, the associations are constituted. While others are recruited by age alone, *umuaka* (which is the most-powerful of the associations) and *ndichin* are by selection (Nsugbe, 1974). Among this Igbo sub-cultural group, *Ikpirikpe* is the women association equivalent to the most powerful of the male. The major feature of this association is its near absolute independence in the affairs of the village womenfolk (Nsugbe, 1974). It can mount a strong and sustained opposition against any action or decision by the men. Also, recruitment is obviously non-lineage based since most of them are wives. This is equivalent to *inyom di* or *anumanu* among the other Igbo sub-cultural groups. Nsugbe has noted that the leader of *Ikpirikpe* is called *eze nwayi* that is female king (queen) who combines the secular function of presiding over meetings or speaking for the body with the ritual role of initiating the planting of crops by women in the farms (Nsugbe, 1974).

Today with the influence of Christianity, these meetings have continued to exist side by side with religious meetings like those of Catholic and Anglican churches. These are the predominant religious organizations in Igboland currently. For instance, every Igbo town holds Annual Meeting, which is often called August Meeting and it takes place in the month of August every year. In Nanka community, the meeting is held at church denominational level (Catholic Church and Anglican Church). Every Nanka woman is expected to travel home town for this meeting. In Nanka, for example, the meeting usually lasts for two weeks the first week the meeting is held at the village level and the second week is a general meeting for all the women from all the seven villages of the town as a corporate body. Issues affecting

the women, both those residing in the home town or problems encountered by the indigenes in the urban areas are discussed, solutions proffered and resolutions reached are later communicated to the men. Similarly, the emergence of town unions in the urban areas has given rise to women branches of such unions wherever the Igbo people find themselves.

It is in the light of this that Anyanwu noted that the right of association, which Igbo culture offered to the womenfolk is one of the fundamental basis to women's political strength in the Igbo society (Anyanwu, 1993a, b). Also, the fact that decisions of community interests are taken at such meetings and resolutions reached, after due consultation are biding on members of the community, reflects women inclusion and diffuses the myth of invisibility that has characterized some of the earlier research works in women in Africa. The Igbo are known for their community consciousness (Afigbo, 1972 ; Ilogu, 1974). Nwoga (1984) summarizes the Igbo community consciousness in the following words:

The individual is a member of the community and it is this community that sets the goals that have acceptability within that community. It is the community that sets up reward and punishment systems. To a large extent, the individual in Igboland is subsumed within the requirements of the community (Nwoga, 1984)

It is in the light of the above that no individual goes to marry a wife without arranging for a prior formal meeting with his bride's family. In fact in Nanka town, if a man from another community comes to seek the hand of an indigene in marriage, questions are asked to find out if any member of the town has gone to the man's place to take a wife in order to ascertain how they were treated. This is because it is believed that kindness to one is kindness to all. The Igbo traditional society, thus, enjoys a strong communal orientation. This has been referred to as ohacracy (Njaka, 1974) or Erima (Anyanwu, 1993a, b). The concept of oha, Njaka notes:

... is far-reaching and can be extended to mean the people, an assembly, a sovereign body, an authority, government (*ochichi*) and a way of life affecting a community. 'aha' may also include the dead the living, and the unborn in its membership, depending on circumstance. Sometimes, 'oha' is used synonymously with *obodo* (the state). aha represents community society as Leopold Sedar Senghor calls it, or 'communoracy' as Sekolu Toure prefers (Njaka, 1974)

The community consciousness of the Igbo, therefore, does not stop with Man's relationship with his fellow Man rather, it includes his relationship with the ancestors and the ala (Earth goddess). Life is therefore assumed to belong to all and based on this suicide is regarded as a grave sin and such people are denied proper burial, which implies denial of a place in the land of the ancestors.

## IGBO KINSHIP SYSTEM

Kinship is a universal phenomenon in the human societies and its importance lies in the position it occupies in the regulation of human behaviour and the formation of social groups. The social recognition and cultural meanings of affinal and consanguineous relationship forms the base for kinship systems. The prohibition of incest and rules of marriage for instance are regulated by the kinship system. The system of kinship and marriage plays an important role in maintaining group cohesion and solidarity and functions as instrument of orienting the individual members to the societal systems (Fig. 1).

Most Igbo societies construct kinship groupings and relationships through unilineal descent system, that is through the male (patrilineal) or female (matrilineal) line. While most of the Igbo societies operate the patrilineal descent system, matrilineal elements predominate in the social systems of the Cross River Igbo. The towns in this Igbo sub-culture include Nkporo Ada, Aro, Abiriba, Abam and Afikpo. Among this Igbo sub-culture, the regulation of political relations in the village is the responsibility of age-based associations. The matrilineal areas like Abiriba and Afikpo practice double descent system. In these societies descent is traced both matrilineal and patrilineal system (Onwuejiegwu, 1981;



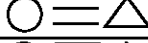
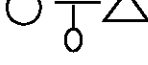
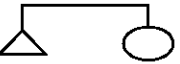
Circle		Represent females
A triangle		Represent males
An equal sign or double horizontal line		Indicates the marriage relationship
A vertical line		Represents descent or parentage (It also separates the generations)
A single horizontal line		Represent a sibling bond

Fig. 1: Kinship symbols. There are some basic symbols used in anthropology to construct kinship diagrams and to trace descent. Relationships are traced through the central character or individual labeled ego. Ego means the central individual from whom relationships are traced

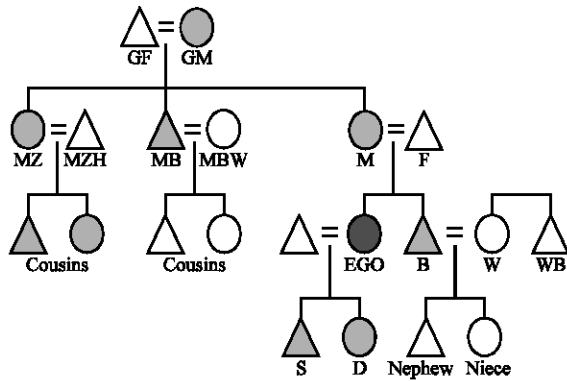


Fig. 2: Matrilineal descent system, Fig. 2 reflects the matrilineal descent system. The ego inherits through the mother's brother rather than the father. All shaded fig in blue are related to the EGO through the mother. The abbreviation F stands for Father, B for Brother, H for Husband, S for Son, M for mother, Z for Sister, D for Daughter and W for Wife (Haviland, 2003)

Okpoko, 1996; Ottenberg, 1968) (Fig. 2). As a distinct Igbo cultural area, the Cross River Igbo or Eastern Igbo share their peculiarity, mostly to their systems of kinship and marriage. This is reflected in their rules of inheritance and succession and in the forms of their men's associations and cults (Forde and Jones, 1950; Nsugbe, 1974; Okpoko, 1996). Both the agnatic (through the father) and uterine ties (through the mother) play significant role in the individual's life among the Afikpo people (Ottenberg, 1968).

Ego may belong to the two sides sharing descent with a common male ancestor and a common female ancestress. The matrilineal grouping in these areas are non-residential as members of a matrigroup are dispersed in the neighbouring villages and are therefore, not directly, tied into other organizations of the village group as the patrilineal Igbo do. The matrigroups in Afikpo for instance, are free-floating in the overall Afikpo social structure and, therefore, lack direct representation in the village or village-group (Okpoko, 1996). Again, among the matrilineal Ohafia people, the matrilineage is the main property owing and property-inheriting group. The patrilineage in this society is endogamous. This allows for a man to take a wife among his agnatic kin group. They believe this helps to foster peace in the home and in the patrilineage. The matrilineage is exogamous though the residential group is the patrilineage. Generally, however, patrilineal system is more common among the Igbo than the matrilineal system. In a patrilineal descent structure shown in the Fig. 3, descent is established by tracing

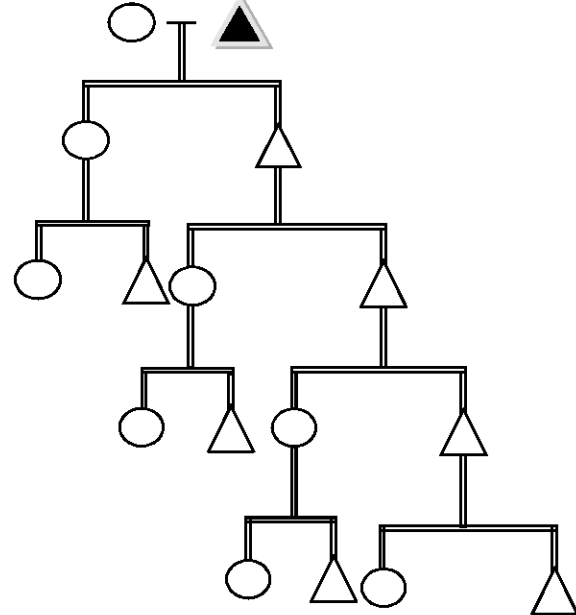


Fig. 3: Patrilineal descent system, the triangles at the extreme right (under the shaded triangle) represent the individuals under the patrilineal system through which successive generations are traced (Schwimmer, 1995)

descent exclusively through the males from a founding male ancestor. In fact, the underlying principle of a patrilineal descent is the unity of the male group. Although both men and woman are included in the patrilineage formed only the male links determines successive generations.

The function of unilineal descent system lies primarily on its role as a primary group, an institution, which normally recruits personnel by the criterion of inherited status. Although there are no well defined objectives, the group's unity and character reflect bonds formed upon common origin and identity and are concerned with the general welfare of the members (Schwimmer, 1995). Kinship, thus understood, often constitutes a corporate group which becomes a legal entity in itself and is assigned collective right on behalf of its members and their estates. The unilineal descent system has played an important part in the development of social organization.

Two major theories, according to Schwimmer have been offered as explanations for this. Of these theories, one is economic, while the other is political. The economic theory, the researcher observed, focuses on the corporate land owning patterns. The postulation is that because land is corporately owned, individuals need the descent system for equitable distribution of the economic

resources among descent groups, which also serves as the basis for regulating the individual's right to productive goods and the right to call upon the economic assistance of others. In Igbo societies, unilineal descent groups assume important corporate functions such as landownership, political representation and mutual aid and support.

The political explanations focus on the need for social order in stateless societies that lack centralized political systems with formal institutions of law-enforcement. Under these conditions, strong and permanent alliances within and between large family-based organizations are necessary to establish the sanctions needed to control disruptive behaviour among their members and to assist them when violence does occur. This approach is associated with the structuralist-functional school (Schwimmer, 1995). In addition to group membership, patrilineal descent controls the course of succession and hence helps in preventing conflict that may likely emerge as a result of when principles that allocate people to such groupings are absent. Generally, therefore, the system of descent as practiced in a society helps in determining parenthood, identify ancestry, controls the course of inheritance and assign people to social categories, groups, roles and social status. For instance, the child a patrilineage daughter bears in her husband's house is recognized in the kinship structure as *nwadiala* in her patrilineage. In this way, such children have some social claims and share to some extent in the membership of their mother's patrilineage. Marriage conducted according to the custom of the people determines where a child belongs in the kinship network, particularly among the Igbo east of the Niger where the biological father or genitor of a child is culturally not regarded as the father of the child if he has not fulfilled certain cultural obligations of bride wealth or proper marriage. In other words, in this society, custom determines who the father of the child is as a child born outside wedlock belongs to the mother's patrilineage. Again, a child's social status is determined by the question of whether the parents belong to the *osu* social caste (outcast), slave or freeborn. A child from an *osu* father automatically inherits the parent's status. Little wonder that Basden has noted that in Igbo society, freedom by birth is a very valuable asset (Basden, 1938).

Apart from family assets, inheritance of personally acquired assets of a man passes to his first son who will assume the responsibility of caring for his younger ones. If it is a polygynous family as it was often the case, the property is shared among the most senior sons of the deceased's wives. Each of these sons goes back to his mother's children to divide his portion with his male

siblings. In the pre-colonial Igbo society, the *okpala* was also entitled to inherit the dead man's widows whom he may marry (depending on her age) or simply cater for. This is known as *nkuchi* in those Igbo societies where it was practiced as such cultural practice has gone into extinction in most societies in Igboland. For the matrilineal Igbo society, the cultural practice is perceived as an abomination. In the society where it existed, the cultural practice ensured that the widow was not subjected to untold hardship due to the absence of a man-figure around her guaranteed her companionship and provided a companion who helped her to perform duties that are gender-specific in the culture like climbing palm trees and repairing her leaking roof. Significantly also, this practice allowed for the family secret to be kept within the household. The successor also catered for the children of his late brother as his own children. A young widow might choose to return to her father's house if she so desired. In contemporary times, due to the influence of Christian religion, rather than marry the widow, the *okpala* simply caters for her and her children if they are still dependent as much as his means can carry. In Igbo traditional culture, women do not inherit within their families of origin or from their husbands, except to the extent that they are expected to be maintained by their husband's heir which is the late husband's first son. Indeed, such intricate network of relationships and kinship ties in the Igbo culture are the basis for understanding the Igbo man's social consciousness, the structures of his socio-political, religious and economic organization and the reasons behind his insistence in bringing up his children according to the customs, ethos, and manners dictated in the culture of his people (Ilogu 1974).

#### **SPACE AND POWER IN THE INDIGENOUS IGBO SOCIETY**

It is imperative at this point to explore certain indices that characterize the Igbo indigenous society, paying attention to how power is implicated in the definition of the individual and groups in the socio-political space. In the light of this, certain questions become vital: to what extent does the representation of men and women in the socio-political structure translate into access to power and decision-making, or functions as checks against the hegemonic control of power of a particular group or individual over the other? In what form does space conceived as spatial hence a venue for decision making and as processes, include or even exclude (as the case may be) the individual members along sex line? In what forms does the Igbo kinship system for instance, empower

men and women in the culture? In other words, what role does gender play in group and intergroup relations in the kinship network? These are the aspects that this section of this paper seeks to address.

In his study of Ibadan, Ajala (2008) writing on *Identity and Space in Ibadan Politics*, Western Nigeria observed that space performs four major functions in Ibadan: consumption, communication, security and settlement. All these functions, according to him are usually expressed in the political, social and economic values attached to space. He further hinted that the construction of space varies across cultures and societies. He then concluded that the varied perspectives on space are informed by a group's attitude to space, access to space and interaction with space as a resource for political power (Ajala, 2008). Like all Yoruba communities, in Ibadan space is constructed from historical, symbolic and functional perspectives (Ajala, 2008). The symbolic dimension to space links a group to cultural construction of meanings, particularly as it deals with the issue of identity.

For the Igbo people, space whether spatial or symbolic plays crucial roles in the definition of the individual and groups. Within the domestic arrangement, for instance, the obi as the abode of the head of the household, functions as zone of power. Certain decisions that are of the overall interest of the family are taken here after due consultations. Each woman in the polygynous household has her own accommodation, an enclosure containing a sleeping place, cooking place, a room or two for keeping her valuables, poultry house, pen for her goats and sheep, barns for her yam and cocoa yam and few economic trees like orange trees and pear. She also has a well to supply water for her immediate use. All these are walled round with a door linking her compound to the bigger family compound at the centre of which the obi is located. Within the woman's compound she lives with her children and is in total control of both the economic and cultural production. Although the man as the head of the household takes certain decisions concerning the over all interest of his household, there is a limit to which such decisions can encroach on the woman's power base in this domestic arrangement.

At the larger society level, the obi of the patrilineage also functions as a space of decision and power negotiation. As the abode of the okpala of the patrilineage, the obi also becomes symbolic, as it functions as the tempo-spiritual essence of the collective identity. Within this spatiality, rituals are performed using the oji (kolanut) and/or ofo (symbol of authority, justice and peace) as key objects of ritual performances invoking the Earth goddess as the mediator between the physical

and the spiritual. Within this dynamism, the woman becomes active participant, though symbolically in the activities in the obi (Ukpokolo, 2007).

In the socio-political organization, space is constructed in the arrangement of men and women in the socio-political structure which has implications on their access to power. In this context, space is conceptualized as the processes through which the individual or group has claim to the right and power to make decisions, or question the decisions or resolutions that could exclude the individual or group or affect the life of the group. The institution of umuada gives women the opportunity to negotiate power by bringing into scrutiny decisions made which affects the life of the group. Power enable and individual or group to cause others to do what the individual wishes the other to do. Power can be exercised in various ways, such as through coercion when we force a person to do something he or she did not want to do as persuasion when we convince someone that that is what she or he really wishes to do or as the construction of incentives when we make the alternative so unattractive that only one reasonable option remains (Shively, 1997). Viewed from this perspective, power becomes complex, elusive and can takes varied forms. The complexities of power situated within the complex Igbo socio-political arrangement buttresses the dynamic interplay that characterize gender relations in the society in such a manner that no group can marginalize the other in the cultural production.

In Igbo indigenous society, both men assembly and women associations can bring question any decision taken by any group of individuals that affect the life of members of the group, particularly if a group feels certain indices were not considered or their rights undermined. Indeed, women have the right to contest any decision that is not in the best interest of the group. In this wise not only do they speak for women, they also speak for men, youth and children. The implication is that it is not just one public but publics which is diverse and diffused in the socio-political maze. This discentring of power as exemplified in the Igbo socio-political consciousness consistently re-enforces the people's belief that the world belongs to all, hence the people say *uwa bu nke onye?*, meaning who can claim the sole ownership of the world? The world here is used metaphorically to represent the Igbo universe. Through the umuada institution and other women organizations and other multiple men's associations within the body polity, voices emanate from these publics interrogating issues that have to do with common good. The juxtaposition of women's groups and men's groups is not in binary opposition but within the context that reflects inter-group complementarity, which recognizes sameness in difference. The inter-relatedness

of groups inherent and instituted in the body polity ensures that power is not concentrated on a single individual or group of individuals. For the Igbo, power belongs to all. Everybody has the right of voice. Hence the people say Onu ejero be onu gbara aka meaning literally mouth does not go to the house of another mouth and go back empty handed. The implication is that everybody has the right of voice to object to what one believes to be unacceptable. Hence, power is not vested solely on an individual or group of individuals nor solely on a particular sex group. Again, the people say A tua eze egwu ekpuru nkata n'iru were gwa ya okwu meaning if one fears the king one will cover one's face with a basket to talk to him. This reflects a culture that rejects intimidation or oppression or where an individual or group possesses hegemonic control of power. Power, as a major resource without which other necessities may elude the individual, the Igbo culture recognizes must be accessible to all irrespective of sex identity. With equitable access to power, justice and equity can thrive. In fact, without power, Lawuyi (2004) reasoned, it may be difficult to access resources, retain resource or commercialize the resource.

Indeed, women in Igbo indigenous society are active participant in the socio-political life of the people, hence the idea of a woman and the fact that she possesses the power to influence decision making dominates Igbo worldview. In conflict situation, women's power comes into force. As the watch dog of public morality, women can use satirical songs known as ikpe to criticize a young man or lady in order to caution him or her against immoral conduct. Songs could be to praise or to condemn. Ikpe are used to criticize the negative aspects of people's lives. The intention is often to correct. In songs of praise, the individual's positive attributes are appreciated and recommended to the people. In this way, songs remain one of the traditional instruments of peacebuilding. Although men sometimes sing satirical songs, it is more common among women. An individual that is the object of ikpe is expected to turn a new leaf. Below is an example of an ikpe (satirical song) directed to a young man:

Onye huru agbogho ju nri	He that sees a lady and rejects food
O je anu agbogho anu?	Will he 'drink' a lady?
Elele Nwazombe, mgbe	Elele Nwazombe, when he called a
O kporo agbogho ura	woman for a 'sleep'
Egwu ekweghi agbogho eje	fear did not allow the lady to go
Ma oburukwa M ka akporo njee	If I were the one called I would go
O je emeya mwere?	Will he arrest her?
Mara na agboro bu alunsi	Know that a lady is a shrine
Onye nuru agboro O je egbu ya.	He that 'drinks' a lady will be killed by her
Anaghi anu agbogho anu	You do not 'drink' a lady
	(Madam Theresa Obeke, A sixty-nine year old informant, August, 2004)

This satirical song is intended to correct immoral behaviour among the youths. By referring to a lady as an alunsi (a shrine), she is seen as not only dangerous but also something to be held in awe and respect. She is not to be approach by an uninitiated. In other words, only one who is legally married to her has the right to drink the lady. Tyrannical leaders are also object of criticisms through the use of ikpe. At times, women could use force by converging in the compound of their victims with their stools singing satirical songs. As the umuada are sacrosanct, their victim has no option but to listen to their complaints.

In a stateless society with no formal and centralized law enforcement agency, such collective approach to problem solving went a long way in maintaining the moral tempo in the community and sustaining harmonious relationships among people. Eventually, the tides of disruptive behavior are curtailed and protected the society from disintegration. Thus, Igbo women are in general, the watchdogs of public morality. Little wonder that Basden posited that the lives of men run on lines quite distinct from those of women (Basden, 1938). In other words, women have their own power base from where they impact the life of people around them and in their society. In the western Igbo, before the European contact and colonization for instance, each town (for instance, Asaba, Ibusa, Agbor among others) was ruled by the obi as the father of the community and the omu as the mother of the community (Okonjo, 1970; Van Allen 1972; Uzuegbunam 1988). It is in the light of this that Basden again submitted:

In every town there is a sort of committee of women, which controls all women affairs and exercises great influence in various directions. The leader is chosen and a ceremonial crowning is performed by a Nri (a priest from Nri town, the mythological home of the Igbo people) similar to the coronation rites observed in the making of a king. The woman chosen is known as awmu (omu) a title equivalent to queen. She is never the wife of the king ..... She is assisted by a limited number of members who take precedence according to age and rank, all of them having taken one or more titles.

The committee further controls everything in the town relating to women. In judging cases where both men and women are involved the chiefs must call upon the members of the committee for their opinions and assistance. The committee makes its own laws for the women of the town irrespective of the men (Basden 1938).

Such description depicts a society where power is diffused along gender line in the socio-political structure. In this wise, women's participation in decision making in



Igbo society, west of the Niger, depicts a society that contradicts the theory of women's invisibility in the society. The cultural practice of sitting on a man (Van Allen, 1972) where the umuada (patrilineage daughters) can put pressure on male member of the community forcing him to obey the resolution of umuada further buttresses the power of the woman to enforce their decision and establish order in the society. Indeed, among the Igbo east of the Niger, the umuada institution and ikpirikpe of the Cross River Igbo, evidenced women's instruments of power negotiation and guarantee them space in the affairs of their community. For the patrilineal society, the system of exogamy offers them double citizenry of their society (Green, 1947). As a member of the umuada institution, she controls burial rites and fertility ceremonies. In her marital home, the woman belongs to the inyomedi, which is an association of wives and here she plays significant role in maintaining peace between the wives and their husbands' relations.

Although the rule of patrilineal system stipulates that people acquire membership in these various descent groups, through their father, the Igbo system involves an interesting uniqueness in the fact that sometimes within the same system it allows for descent to pass through the mother rather than the father. Instances like this arise where a woman bears a child outside wedlock, particularly among the Igbo of east of the Niger. Such a child automatically belongs to the mother's patrilineage. Similarly, the woman marriage allows a woman to be the sociological husband and father of a woman and child respectively (Amadiume, 1987). As a woman husband becomes the sociological father of the child, the child belongs to her patrilineage and answers her father's name. Again, there is a cultural arrangement where a female can be retained in her father's house to procreate outside wedlock. Although her father is not the biological father of the children from such arrangement, the children belong to him, bear his name and call him father. This practice takes place mostly when the man has no male child of his own. Such domestic arrangement further creates avenue for women's voices to be articulated at the family unit. As a mother and a daughter in her natal home, her positionality enhances her ability to negotiate the social and political space both at the domestic level and patrilineage levels. Thus, women in Igbo society are presented not as objects but as actors in the socio-political and economic life of their society (Meek, 1937; Leith-Ross, 1939; Amadiume, 1987).

A person's relationship with his or her mother's relatives is also significant and forms part of the Igbo kinship arrangement. They are his or her *nna ochie* and *nne ochie* which means ancient father and ancient mother

respectively (for lack of equivalent words). Children are regarded as *nwadia* in their mother's patrilineage. These relationships are closely integrated into the kinship system that it offers a patrilineally organized people special rights and privileges in their mother's patrilineages including such rights and privileges that they do not receive in their own descent group that is their father's patrilineage. Thus, the *nwadia* is sacrosanct in his or her mother's patrilineage. In the traditional society, the *nwadia* also plays significant roles in peacebuilding between his father's town and mother's town. This practice gives the Igbo marriage system relative stability and further strengthens intergroup relations, hence foregrounding women's positionality. Such institutionalized connections contribute in no small measure in strengthening the structure of groups and kinship network. The female marriage (Amadiume, 1987) as practiced in some Igbo societies equally implies that children by the female husband retain their mother's patrilineage. This network of relationships offers the Igbo traditional society its uniqueness and colour and ensures that no group is left out in the scheme of things and thus strengthens the family, kinship and communal bonds with the woman functioning as the nucleus in this connectivity.

## CONCLUSION

Igbo indigenous social and political organizations depict a society that recognizes the complementarity of men and women in their socio-cultural development and the making of their civilization. Institutions, both political and social also reflect this recognition. Instructively, power is diffused in the society with each sex group recognizing the indispensability of the other. Hence, power is reflected as complex and its bases variously defined. Thus, men and women in the kinship network, the family and other social and political institutions are defined by their positionality from where they derive their power and participate in the sustenance of those values, precepts and norms that shape the people's world. Thus, the position of men and women in the traditional Igbo indigenous socio-political arrangement shows a clear element of gender collaboration and mutual dependence.

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