



Exploring the *Oga* political institution in Oko, Western Igboland, Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper examines the Oga institution as a parallel political system to the male political power among the Oko people. The study outlines the fluidity of gender roles of the Oga who despite being a woman enjoyed all the political rights and privileges of a king. The Oga assumed male roles such as marrying a wife and raising a family. Against this background, this study seeks to provide answers to several questions including the origin of the Oga institution in Oko and why it was created as well as its functions in society. It also explores the power relationships between the Oga institution and other women's organisations such as the Umuada (daughters of the lineage) and Onowu Nwanyi or Isi-Ada, (the oldest woman) the Ndi Iyemedi (married women/wives group) and spiritual forces, rituals, and deities. Data were drawn from oral sources and a close reading of extant literature was undertaken.

Keywords: Western Igboland, Oko, Oga, Odeaja, Igala, Egwugwu, Omu, Matriarchy.

Introduction

Historical studies over the years have concentrated largely on the achievements and exploits of men in the development of their societies. These studies have portrayed women as not only victims of men's domination and marginalisation but in most cases, as non-existent (Ishola Alao, 2019). In recent times, historians have made attempts to correct these misconceptions, prejudices and distortions regarding women's role in the historical process. This is because of the growing recognition of the significant roles of women in the development of their societies. Eminent Africanist historians such as Vansina (1988) and Rodney (1972) in their works acknowledged the existence of pre-colonial African states in the wake of independent movements in Africa in the late 1950s and 1960s. Despite that, their works focused on men's history, while giving marginal attention to women.

Over time, there has been intense debate on women's political role among African societies including those of the Igbo. This paper joins this debate by extending the scope of the conversations on women's role in the political institutions in African societies. There are three broad perspectives regarding the place of women in the political institutions of African societies. The competing perspectives revolve around whether pre-colonial African society was, and still is patriarchal or matriarchy or rather one system evolved from another one or both systems co-existed up to the contemporary

time. From the patriarchal perspective, scholars describe African political institutions as largely patriarchal leading to the under-representation of women.

Patriarchy, as an ideology, is the manifestation and institutionalisation of male dominance over women in society which entails that "men hold power in all the important institutions of society" and that "women are deprived of access to such power". However, this does not imply that "women are either powerless or deprived of rights, influence, and resources" (Sultana, 2011:3). Patriarchy is conceptualised as men's predominance in political leadership with the exclusion of women in both public and private spheres. Patriarchy, they contend, gives absolute priority to men and some extent limits women's human rights, but despite the domination, men are in control (Sultana, 2011:3). This school of thought asserts that patriarchy has ensured that all the power and authority in African society remain entirely in the hands of men depriving women of their rights and opportunities; and restricting their mobility, freedom and property (Sultana, 2011:3-7). It tends to keep women away from the power systems through the construction of private and public realms for women and men respectively (Walby, 1990:24). Proponents of the patriarchal perspective agree that African society is patriarchal based on the unequal gender relations that cast women into subordinate positions. However, such a view is not always the case rather, patriarchy

emerged as a result of external influences of religions (Islam and Christianity), colonialism, and education among others.

The existence of matriarchy in pre-colonial African societies has attracted the attention of scholars from varied disciplinary fields. Clarke traces the origin of matriarchy to a primordial family found during ancient times in Africa and maintains that matriarchy is older anywhere else in the world (Clarke, 1984: 123-134). In his work, Cohen focuses on the phenomenon of the African queen mothers and argues that there is a prevalence of female title-holders who occupied the highest levels of political institutions in ancient and pre-colonial African societies. He contends that the office of queen mother was generally ceremonial and served as a fulcrum around which potential opposition to the king could be safely checked. He opines that at times, the queen's mother does not possess real political authority; rather the true political power resides with the king (Cohen, 1977:14-30 as cited in Farrer: 579-580).

Other scholars of the matriarchal persuasion include Amadiume (1995), Okonjo (1973); Okome (2002), and Sofola (1998) among others who contend that matriarchy was practised in pre-colonial African society and that the claims by some Western scholars that African society is completely patriarchal are misleading. They argue that Africa is a society where gender roles with distinctive responsibilities are assigned to both sexes, but gender relations only emerged through the

dynamics of patriarchy that consigns women to a subordinate role to men (Okome, 2002; Okonjo, 1973; Amadiume, 1993; Sofola, 1998). They further argued that African women have been playing significant complementary roles in the pre-colonial political institutions of their societies despite the predominance of patriarchy in African societies. Besides, African women were not passive, but active participants in the religious, social, economic, and political spheres of their societies. They opined that African women possessed power and authority to make decisions, issue orders and enforce compliance. Female political leaders were as common as male rulers, and they played central roles in the smooth administration of their societies (Achebe, nd.).

In her seminal work, Okonjo (1973: 45) describes the nature of the pre-colonial Igbo society and notes that the "dual-sex" political systems have been in practice in the Western Igbo area before colonialism. She avers that women were not unimportant or marginalised in Igbo society, but had political roles within the dual-sex systems. The dual sex systems that featured the male and female representatives in the different domains of social life did not privilege men over women, but rather activated parallel male and female sharing of power. Amadiume's works (1993 & 1995) focus on the matriarchal patterns in Igbo society and contend that despite patriarchy, titled women still have control over the markets and rule and regulate the activities of women folks.

The third perspective that stands the mid-way between patriarchy and matriarchy systems is propounded by Friedrich Engels, who traced the evolution of patriarchy to the ancient times when patriarchy entrenched men's supremacy and domination of women. Engels claimed that patriarchy evolved from the matriarchal system in Africa as a result of the advent of religions and colonialism among other factors (Engels, 1962:59). Engels' assertions have attracted criticisms from African scholars such as Diop (1987), Amadiume (1993 & 1995), Okome (2002), and others, who contended that African society was matriarchal in ancient times, but despite that, African society in contemporary times is largely patriarchal, including Nigeria (Engels, 1962:264). It could be drawn from the patriarchy and matriarchy debate that political leadership was not new or alien to African women in pre-colonial society. Women's positions existed, but these were complementary, and not subordinate to men. Political power and authority were divided between men and women in a dual-sex political system in which each sex managed and controlled their affairs and practised in Western Igbo societies including Oko.

This paper contributes to the growing literature on the nature of political participation among women in Igbo societies, arguing that despite the predominance of patriarchy, the core power structure also accommodated matriarchy. This is evident in the establishment of the *Oga* institution which ruled in parallel with King, *Eze* and

sometimes, ruled as the sole ruler on the demise or absence of the king in Oko. The *Oga* institution in Oko elevated the political status of women to some extent to that of men. The elaborate and systematic mix of patriarchy and matriarchy in a decentralized Oko society counters the claims by some scholars that African society is purely patriarchal, where power and authority are controlled exclusively by men.

Methodology and sources of data

There is a general lack of detailed historical documentation or information on the *Oga* political institution in Oko. This paper overcomes this challenge by relying more on oral traditions than the scanty written available documents for the reconstruction of the *Oga* institution. This paper adopts the qualitative research methodology and data was collected through oral interviews with selected key informants. Most of the data were collected through oral interviews in which first-hand information was elicited from selected key informants comprising the elders, titled men, women, and educated elites who are custodians of the history of Oko and renowned local historians.

Questions were elicited from the informants on the origin of the *Oga* institution in Oko and why was it created; the qualifications for the *Oga* and how the *Oga* was installed/crowned. They provided insights into the main functions of the *Oga* in Oko and how the *Oga* relates with the *Umuada* and *Onowu nwanyi* (the oldest woman) and other

titled women in other quarters or villages in Oko. Other information elicited from them was the *Oga's* relationship with supernatural powers, rituals, and deities, the *Oga's* relationships with the Omus in Anioma communities including the Omu of Onitsha and Osamala east of the Niger? The researcher's knowledge of the local history of Oko was a vital source of data. Secondary data were collected through a close reading of extant literature including contemporary writings on the history of Oko by historians. Both primary and secondary data were subjected to critical analysis to authenticate their validity and/or debunk some perceptions and assumptions inherent in the data. This is aimed at presenting an authentic history of the role of the *Oga* political institution in Oko which has been grossly neglected by historians and scholars.

The gap

There is a preponderance of works that focus on kings, empires, kingdoms, and state-building in African historiography. Yet, matriarchs who occupied prominent positions in political institutions of their societies are believed not to have existed or their societies were forgotten or fictionalised. The pervasiveness and dominance of patriarchy tends to rule out the existence of matriarchal societies which is perceived as unthinkable for men to be subordinate or answerable to a female ruler. It is untrue that matriarchal political institutions never existed in African societies, but at one time or the other, it existed; some prominent matriarchs wielded

enormous powers and authority and left indelible landmarks on their societies. In some circumstances, the matriarchs were not even the direct leaders themselves but had a strong influence because of the relationship they had with the male rulers as evident in the existence of queen mothers in pre-colonial African kingdoms, empires and states. Queen mothers were the mothers of kings in some societies such as the Benin kingdom, while in Ghana; queen mothers were selected from the royal family of each town. Their duties and responsibilities also differed in each society. In some societies, they were female leaders who made laws and commanded respect, while in other societies they served as heirs apparent to the throne (Farrar, 1997)

In pre-colonial African societies, men alone were not responsible for initiating policies and creating political institutions, women were actively involved in all stages of empire-building, they were warriors and served as political advisers. Sometimes, women were the main political and military leaders of their societies and states who made laws and led armies to battles during wars. In some pre-colonial African societies, some women have played a pivotal in the growth and development of empires through expansionist programmes of conquest, subjugation, dominion, and incorporation of vassal states into their kingdoms and empires. They contributed greatly to the political, economic, administrative, military, and socio-cultural developments of their societies in Africa.

Africa is noted for the presence of women in political positions. They were active in politics, had certain administrative roles as queen mothers, and queens and were given certain rights and influence in the indigenous administration. There was a prevalence of titled women in Fatim Beye, Ndoye Demba and Nadate Yalla Mbodji societies in Senegal, Yaa Asantewaa of Ghana, Yennenga of Burkina Faso, Hangbe of Benin, Makeda, Zawditu and Embet Ilen of Ethiopia and Eritrea, Nandi of South Africa, Hatshepsut of Egypt and the female chiefs among the Mende and Serbo of Sierra Leone (Nnemeka, 2004:333-34 & Akyeampong and Hippolyte, 2012:2-3). In the Central African region, there were Matrilineal societies in Chewa in Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia, and Makode in Tanzania and Mozambique (Duiker & Spielvogel, 2013: 268).

Women occupied positions of power in different spheres in pre-colonial West African societies. Women such as Queen Idia and Enota in the Benin kingdom, Moremi, Madam Tinubu Iyolade in Yorubaland, and Amina of Zaria were prominent in the politics of their societies. In Dahomey, women ruled as the reign-mate of the king. The Queen Mother, Kpojito, was the female reign-mate of the king of Dahomey and the richest and most powerful woman in the kingdom. The queen's mother not only helped in consolidating the power of the king but also succeeded in bringing kings to power (Odoemene, 2008). Apart from holding chieftaincy titles, traditional practices in some societies allow

the passing down of dynastic rights through matrilineal lines such as Asanteman, Balobedu and Wollof kingdoms (Bouilly, 2016).

In Nigeria, women have welded enormous political authority such as *Iya Oba* (queen mother), *Iya Afin*, *Erelu* and Madam Tinubu among others (Ikpe, 2004:23). Other women monarchs were Queen Amina of Zaria, Moremi, Queen Idia, Queen Amina, Nana Asma'u and so on. In Igbo societies, women were politically significant. Women monarchs existed such as the *Omu* in Asaba, Ibusa, Ogwuashi-Uku, Okpanam and other parts of Anioma (Western Igboland) including the *Omu* of Onitsha and *Omu* Okwei of Osamala in Eastern Igboland. Colonialism marked the beginning of the end of equality between both genders in the political affairs of most African societies resulting in the systematic decline of the positions women previously held. In Igbo societies, for example, a few Igbo women were appointed as warrant chiefs or members of courts. For example, Ahebi Ugbabe was appointed as a headman, warrant chief and later, a king of Enugu Ezike in the Nsukka Province of the Eastern Region (Achebe, 2011), while *Omu* Okwei of Ossamala was appointed as a member of the Onitsha Native Court from 1912 to the 1930s (Chuku, 2013).

There is a tendency in Nigerian historiography for scholars to focus on large, centralised polities, otherwise called mega-states, while decentralized or mini-states are

only given marginal attention. Scholars such as Basden (1966), Isichei (1978), Nzimiro (1972), Ohadike (1994), Afigbo (1981) Nwaokocha and Nzemeke (2002) have extensively studied the pre-colonial and colonial political institutions of Niger-Igbo communities by placing much emphasis on the history of their origins mainly from the Igala, Igbo and Benin migratory trends, while the political role of women in decentralised societies such as Igboland has been given less attention in historical scholarship (see Basden, 1966; Isichei, 1978; Nzimiro, 1972; Afigbo, 1981; Onwuejeogwu, 1981; Nwaokocha & Nzemeke, 2002).

The existing scholarship on women leaders and/or monarchs in Western Igboland focuses on the *Omu* political institution in Asaba, Ibusa, Okpanam, Ogwuashi-Uku and Onitsha and Osamala in Eastern Igboland with no attention paid to the *Oga* institution in Oko. This historiographical neglect of the *Oga* leaves gaps in the literature that need a more nuanced knowledge and understanding of the existence and roles of the *Oga* in Oko society. It is this lacuna that this paper intends to fill.

Oko adopts the dual-sex political institutions that were practised in Asaba, Okpanam, Ibusa, Ogwuashi-Uku and other Anioma communities. The *Oga* (Queen Mother) political institution originated from Igala and has been in practice since the founding of Oko in the 17th century. It is the highest title held by a woman called *Oga Nwanyi*, who sometimes, ruled in parallel with the *Eze*, the

king. On the enthronement of the *Oga*, the woman ceased to be a woman and became transformed into a man. The *Oga* was admitted into the men's societies and dressed like a man. The *Oga* ruled in parallel with the king, *Eze*, but sometimes, in the absence of the *Eze*, the *Oga* ruled as the sole ruler and performed the political functions with the assistance of male elders, *Ndichie*, eldest woman, *Onowu Nwanyi*, titled women and the *Umuada*, the daughters of the lineage.

The political system in Oko, just like in other societies in the Western Igbo area has been patriarchal, but it assigned and/or reserved some positions for women which have enabled them to play significant roles in the traditional political institutions and governance. Such roles include the establishment of the *Oga Nwanyi*, the Queen and woman monarchial institution. Apart from the *Oga*, there are other titled positions occupied by women such as *Isi-Ada* or *Onowu Nwanyi*, *Ogene*, *Ojieh*, *Oyete-Igala* and *Ochuwa*. Of all the women titles, the *Oga* is supreme, and it is bestowed on a distinguished and respected *Umuada* member from the quarters that are the descendants of Odeaja, an Igala prince and founder of Oko. The *Oga* is the highest title or position a woman could aspire to in the Oko political set-up. It is the equivalent of the king, *Eze*.

Oko in context

Geographically, Oko is located in Delta State and other communities such as Ilah, Ebu and Odekpe and Ossamala which are located in

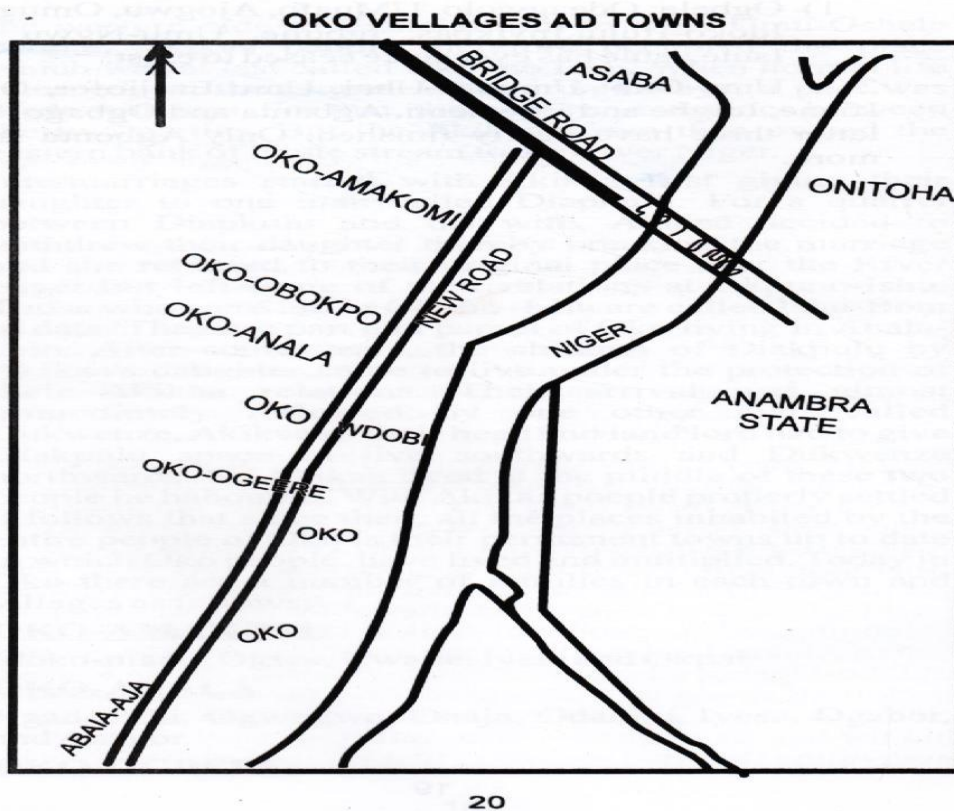
the Lower Niger trace their ancestral homes to Idah in the Igala kingdom on the Upper Niger. They believe that they migrated at different times from Idah to their present abodes in the Lower Niger some centuries before the advent of the British in the area that would later become southern Nigeria. After establishing a permanent settlement in Lower Niger, these groups of Igala descent from Idah have continued to interact and relate among themselves as Igala asserted much influence on them. They share common elements of Igala political institutions, titles, festivals, and socio-cultural practices with varying differences.

The history of origin and migration of the Oko people has attracted the attention of some European and colonial administrators such as Basden (1966), Henderson (1972) and Boston (1962). Nigerian historians and scholars in their studies (Isichei, 1978; Awogu, 2003; Biosah, 1970; Afigbo, 1971; Nzimiro, 1972) have linked the history of the origin of Oko and migratory routes to Idah, the capital of the Igala Kingdom. A popular version of history has it that Oko, Odekpe and Osamala were brothers who migrated from Igala at the same time probably in the 17th century and settled on the west and east of the River

Niger respectively (Anwasia, 2017; Okobi, 2009; Modebe, 1992). Oko still shares ancestral origin, and social, cultural, and political institutions with other Igala migrants such as Ilah, Ebu, and Asaba in western Igboland and Odekpe, Ossamala, and Onitsha in eastern Igboland. These affinities tend to bind them together and enhance their relationships since the earliest times.

Oko lies five kilometres south of Asaba, the capital of Delta State. It is made up of seven villages, namely: Oko-Amakom, Oko-Obiofu, Oko-Anala, Oko-Ogbele, Oko-Umuoko, Aikah-Ezeolu, and Odifulu. The villages are contiguous and are part of the Oshimili-South Local Government Area except for Aikah which is lumped together with the neighbouring town of Abala-Oshimili in the Ndokwa-East Local Government Area of Delta State. Oko is bounded on the east by the River Niger, on the north by Okwe and Asaba, on the west by Ibusa and on the south by Abala-Oshimili. Oko belongs to the Igbo-Olu or Ogbaru/Ogbahu Niger Igbo group which points to their living very close to the banks of River Niger. Oko is located at a strategic site along the River Niger which practices an autonomous and acephalous village group kingdom.

A map of Oko



Source: (Anwasia, 2017:20).

The people are predominantly agrarian and cultivate mainly yam, cassava, maize, potatoes and vegetables. They are renowned fishermen who fish on the River Niger and other numerous streams and rivulets. They engage in hunting and local handicrafts building canoes, drums, baskets and other local crafts. They trade in food items and local crafts with their neighbouring communities of Asaba Ibusa, Ogwuashi-Uku, Otulu, Ewulu,

Abala, Aboh among others. The people engage in trade and other economic contacts with Igbos people across the River Niger such as Onitsha, Odekpe, Osamala, Atani, Oguta, Onono, and others. Oko participated actively during the period of the slave trade and had settlements for the freed slaves.

Oko is one of the communities that make up the present political configuration of the Oshimili-South Local Government Area of

Delta State. The historical origin of Oko has received some attention from British colonial officials, and professional and local historians. According to a British colonial officer, Kerr (1936), Oko claimed descent from a son of an Attah of Idah named Odeaja who left Igala with two brothers; Idelekepe and Igiri who founded the villages of Odekpe and Osamala (Kerr, 1936). Henderson in his account states that "organized flights took place from Igala country and its peripheries, and one of them is detailed in the oral traditions of the towns of Osomari Odekpe, and Oko. The legends of these old riverine Ibo towns recount that their founders were originally subjects of the Attah who lived in the lower Igala country near the Anam floodplain. Attacked by an army of warrior ants sent by the Ata to plague them, they fled southward by canoe and founded first the town of Oko on the west bank, then the towns of Odekpe and Osomari on the east bank" (Henderson, 1972: 68).

Ikenna Nzimiro in *Studies in Ibo Political System: Chieftaincy and Politics in Four Niger States* maintained that the eight groups of Ika, Iteka, Inyamam, Inoma, Uje, Odekpe, Oko and Ossomari originally live in a part of Idah, the capital of the Igala kingdom, but migrated to avoid the yearly payment of tribute to the king (the Attah) and the official tax-collector had decided to take drastic measures against them (Nzimiro, 1972). Elizabeth Isichei avers that "a whole clan of Niger Igbo towns claims Igala origins, or has quarters which trace their descent

from Igala, among these may be mentioned Oko, Odekpe, Ilah, and Ossomari" (Isichei, 1976: 54). In another work of hers, Isichei further maintains that: "Other Igala foundations in the lower Niger include the Oko villages South of Asaba, and two-quarters of Ilah, the most northerly Niger Ibo town" (Isichei 1973: 56).

Recent works by Kaine (1963), Modebe (1992), Okobi (2009), and Anwasia (2017) corroborate that Oko people originated from Idah in the Igala Kingdom probably in the 17th century. According to Anwasia, Oko in the course of his migration from Idah took with him his two younger relatives: Ideke and Igili, the founders of the present Odekpe and Osamala . Both oral and written accounts of the origin of Oko point to Odeaja, an Igala prince from Idah in Igalaland. Oko and other Igala migrants on the lower Niger have lost their original Igala language due to a long period of migration from their ancestral home in Idah probably in the 17th century. The people lost the Igala language and now speak a distinctive Igbo dialect because of their close contact with the Igbos. Despite that, virtually all the quarters in Oko bear Igala names such as Idoko, Onoja, Ogwu, Inyele, Ngada, Ogabor, Uwaile, Iyese and others. Besides, Igala culture is still very strong in Oko's traditions and cultural practices, especially in *Egwugwu*, masquerade.

Origin of the *Oga* political institution

The pre-colonial Oko society, like other societies in Anioma and parts of Igboland, practised patriarchy in their political institutions. Despite that, these societies provided some spaces for women’s participation in political administration and governance. Thus, women have been playing vital functions in the traditional political set-up right from the pre-colonial era to the present time. In Oko, one of such political positions occupied by women is through the establishment of the *Oga* political institution, that is, the woman monarch or the Queen. The *Oga* political institution is generally believed to have originated from Idah in Igalaland, where Odeaja, the founder of Oko migrated from. It is not certain the exact date when the *Oga* monarchial institution was established. There is no available source or evidence that could give an exact period that the first *Oga* reigned in Oko. Rather, what is known through oral and written sources is that the *Oga* institution is as old as

Oko itself. Oral sources, reminiscences and memories of the people point to Idah in Igalaland as where the *Oga* institution originated from many centuries ago (NAME of the interviewee, personal communication, MONTH and DATE 2021). Anwasia, P.A. Iweze, Oranyeli, A.A. Ndah personal communication, December, 2021.

The past *Oga nwanyi* in Oko

Oral tradition has recorded that the first *Oga* was Alagbua, while the second *Oga* was Anwusia Oputa are believed to have reigned long ago probably in the pre-colonial and early colonial periods. There is no record of the specific date of their reign or even the chronological order of their reigns. Oral information recounts that the first *Oga* could be Alagbua of Ngada in Oko-Anala, the second was Anwusia Oputa of Idokomadu quarters in Oko-Amakom followed by Ulo Anuka of Oko-Ogbele and Ekpete Oranyeli from Oko Anala who reigned from 1979 to 2004. This is shown in the table below:

Table 1. showing the reign of the *Oga* in Oko

| No. | Name | Quarters | Village | Year of Reign |
|-----|----------------------------------|------------|------------|---------------|
| 1 | <i>Oga</i> Alagbua | Umu-Ngada | Oko-Anala | Not Available |
| 2 | <i>Oga</i> Anwusia Oputa | Idokomadu | Oko-Amakom | Not Available |
| 3 | <i>Oga</i> Olu Anuka, | Ajogwu | Oko-Ogbele | Not Available |
| 4 | <i>Oga</i> Ekpete Okofu Oranyeli | Umu-Ngada, | Oko-Anala | 1979-2004 |

Source: Data collected during field work, (2021).

The above table shows that since the demise of *Oga* Ekpete Oranyeli in 2004, no *Oga* has reigned in Oko up to the present time. There is no accurate record to show the dates of the reign of the first four *Ogas*, but shreds of oral evidence suggest that they may have reigned either at the turn of the pre-colonial period or the early colonial period. The contemporary information on the installation of the *Oga* in Oko was collected during the crowning of *Oga* Ekpete Okofu Oranyeli the *Oga* at Oko Anala in 1979.

Igala connection

The *Oga Nwanyi* in Igala language connotes a queen and the head of the womenfolk. Oko people inherited the *Oga* institution and other men's and women's titles from Idah in Igala introduced by Odejaja, the founder of Oko probably in the seventeenth century (Ibid). The *Oga* was a woman monarch, an equivalent to the king or *Eze*. Women had occupied prominent positions in the political institutions in the Igala Kingdom. The first king *Attah* of Igala was a woman known as Ebulejonu, who reigned around the 14th century. She was succeeded by her brother Aganapoje, the father of Idoko. Ebulejonu was the only female king as successive kings, *Attahs* were males. *Iye Akuma* is the Queen Mother in the Igala Kingdom whose functions focus on overseeing the welfare of women, widows, children, orphans, and the less privileged in society. The *Iye Akuma* has been playing important roles in the coordination of women and their activities including the

control of markets. The title was introduced many centuries ago and rotates among the four ruling royal houses in the Igala Kingdom. The current *Iye Akuma* of Igala is Chief Memuna Opaluwa Oguche (Ayegba, 2023). Like the *Iye Akuma*, *Iye Ebule Igalaogba* attends to the welfare needs of women but does not have control over markets. The present *Iye Ebule Igalaogba* of Igala is Chief Rekiya Abuh.

There was also *Iye Attah* (Mother of the Attah Igala) who played the same function as *Iye Akuma* and sometimes, deputised in the absence or death of *Iye Akuma* (M.A.Omale, personal communication, July 14, 2023). The existence of women who wielded some power and influence in the Igala Kingdom and the titles that have been preserved up to the present time suggests that the *Oga* and probably, the *Omu* monarchs are equivalents of the *Iye Akuma* and *Iye Attah*. This suggests that the *Oga* may have been imported from Igala Kingdom.

The *Oga* operated and ruled in parallel with the king by complementing the king in the running of the affairs of society. In some cases, the *Oga* ruled the villages or quarters on the death of a king or when there was no existing king. The *Oga* performed all the political functions of the king by giving titles to men and announcing and declaring open the *Ulor* and *Iwaji* festivals (Anwasia, 2017). The *Oga* institution is not hereditary but could be only bestowed on prominent, distinguished, and wealthy daughters or

Umuada from the descendants of the sons of Odeaja. The members of Odeaja descent are found in five villages of Oko comprising Idokomadu quarters, which is the oldest son of Odeaja in Oko-Amakom. They are also found in the nine quarters in Oko-Anala, except Umu-Ogwu and Inyele. In Oko-Ogbele, they were found in all the quarters except in the Umu-Ngwu and Igbilie quarters. They are found in all the quarters in Oko-Umuoko. Odeaja descent represents over eighty percent of quarters and villages in Oko, while the non-Odeaja groups are the minority representing about twenty percent of the Oko population.

There is no historical document that could give the exact date the first three *Oga* reigned in Oko. The only known information is the installation of the last *Oga*, Her Royal Highness Ekpete Okofu Oranyeli, who was installed in 1979 and ruled till 2004 when she died. No new *Oga* has been crowned since the death of *Oga* Ekpete Okofu Oranyeli. This could be attributed to the huge financial outlay involved in the coronation which involved elaborate ceremonies that were full of pomp and pageantry as well as the maintenance and sustenance of the *Oga* institution. This means that the *Oga* aspirant must be wealthy because it involves taking all the men's and women's titles, slaughtering seven cows and other entertainments. Women's aversion to taking the *Oga* could also be a result of the series of ritual processes that the *Oga* aspirant would undergo before coronation and the taboos

after the coronation. The impact of Christianity could be another significant reason as some qualified women may not be interested in taking the title because of their faith. The rarity of the *Oga* could be because the title is not thrown open to all women in Oko as women of non-Odeaja descent are not qualified to become an *Oga*. Available tradition could only recount or/record the reign of four *Ogas* since the founding of Oko. On the death of *Ogas*, it took many years before another one was installed. Although title-taking has lapsed in Igboland, this does not apply to Oko because people have continued to preserve their rich cultural heritage by taking traditional titles they inherited from Igala. The lapse in title-taking may not be a major reason for the rarity of the *Oga* in Oko.

The coronation of *Oga*

Credible information on the installation of *Oga* is gleaned during the installation of *Oga*, Ekpete Oranyeli of Oko-Anala in 1979. The crowning of the *Oga* in some ways was equivalent to that of the king. The *Oga* must be installed by a king and in the absence of a king, Onihe Okakwu would coronate the *Oga*. The *Oga* as a female monarch was crowned by the king, *Eze* who was supreme and head of the political institution. The *Oga* was hemmed in taboos. Before the coronation, the *Oga* designate must undergo various purification processes or retreats and adhere strictly to the traditional norms, taboos and protocols. She must be initiated into various

women and men's titles and rituals such as *Isini-Nsele*, and *Ikpu-Igbu*, a title that was taken for acts of bravery and followed the *Isha Dibia* (Witch or native doctors cult) in which she will be in seclusion for seven days before the final initiation ceremony. The *Inaji-Onye* title conferred on her the title of *Ezeji*, (king of yam) is exclusively taken by men.

On the coronation day, the *Oga* will go to the king's palace to receive the *Ofo* (staff of office). On clutching the *Ofo* with her right hand, an able-bodied man from her family will carry her on his shoulder from the king's palace to her palace for the coronation. Being carried shoulder-high signifies *Oga's* transformation from a woman to a man. After the coronation day, the *Oga* must wear a red fez cap (*Okpu Ododo*) decorated with eagle feathers just like the king. The fez red cap is the royal paraphernalia that distinguished the *Oga* from other titled women and men. An *Oga* cannot be removed or forced to abdicate

the throne once crowned, but since she has no independent power, she must consult the king, elders and titled men and women cabinet members and get their consent before making decisions on matters affecting the society she governs.

On ascension to the throne, the *Oga* could rule in parallel with the king, but when there was no king, the *Oga* ruled as the sole supreme political head of the society and performed all kingly functions. For instance, *Oga* Ekpete Oranyeli (1979-2004) was a contemporary of *Eze* Ogwuanyasi Oputa 1 (1977-1995) in Oko Anala and *Eze* Olisa 11 (1978-1997) in Oko-Umu-Oko. The two kings and the *Oga* reigned in the mid-1970s until the demise of both kings in 1995 and 1997 respectively. On their passing away, *Oga* Ekpete Oranyeli ruled Oko-Anala village as the supreme monarch, while the ritual functions were performed by the Onihe Okakwu and Onowu Nwanyi.

Figure 1: *Oga* Ekpete Okofu Oranyeli, 1979-2004





Source: Pictures taken at the *Oga*'s palace at Oko-Anala on June 14, (2023) by the author.

There are certain qualities and conditions the *Oga* aspirant must possess and fulfil before she can be crowned. The foremost qualification is that the woman must be one of the *Umuada*, the daughters of the sons of Odeaja, the founder of Oko. The four *Ogas* that reigned in Oko were Anwusia Oputa from Idokommadu quarters in Oko-Amakom, Ulo Anuka from Ajogwu quarters in Oko-Ogbele, while *Oga* Alagbua and Ekpete Oranyeli were from Umu-Ngada quarters in Oko-Anala (P.E. Oranyeli, C.N. Anwasia & A.A. Ndah, personal communication, December 18, 2021). The *Oga* is the highest women's title in Oko, but it is an exclusive preserve of prominent, illustrious, and wealthy *Nwada* or daughters of quarters of Odeaja descent. The evidence is deducible from the fact that the four *Ogas* that had reigned were all women from the Odeaja descendants.

Besides, the *Oga* aspirant is mandated to take all the men's and women's titles such as *Inya-Amala*, (a group of wealthy and women elite which is an equivalent of the men's *Ezeji*, king of yam title to be qualified for the *Oga*. The *Oga* is bestowed on women of great moral standing, integrity, uprightness, honesty, strong character and proven records of having contributed significantly to the development of society. The *Oga* could marry and have children but must not be installed during her husband's lifetime. This is because she is not supposed to be more powerful or possess supreme power and authority than her husband. For example, *Oga* Anwusia Oputa was married to Chief Oputa from Aboh and they had children. She was crowned the *Oga* after the demise of her husband (P.A. Iweze, personal communication, December 18, 2021). *Oga* Ekpete Oranyeli was previously married to Chief Ezenyili of Uwaile-Isi-ani in Oko-Amakom, but she was barren. Being

childless, she separated from her husband and returned to her family in Oko-Anala before she was installed as the *Oga*.

The functions of *Oga*

The *Oga* performs many significant functions in Oko political institutions that are mainly administrative. The *Oga* had an advisory council of women who advised and assisted the *Oga* in the administrative functions.

Members of the women's council were drawn mainly from elderly women whom the *Oga* gave titles equivalent to the men's titles such as Oduah, Akwue, Okita, Odaje-Asi and Ikor among others (P.A. Iweze & P.E. Oranyeli, personal communication, December 18, 2021). The *Oga* received and dealt with civil cases and matters relating to the womenfolk such as the settlement of disputes between two or more women, domestic violence and abuses between wives and husbands, and other related issues that could not be settled at the family or village levels. Cases that could not be handled or resolved by the *Oga* were transmitted to the king for resolution.

Matters and cases considered taboos such as female infidelity, theft and witchcraft accusations and others with spiritual implications were treated by the *Isi-Ada* or *Onowu Nwanyi* who by tradition must be the oldest woman. She was saddled with the responsibility of adjudicating such cases (C.N. Anwasia (Mrs.) & A.A. Ndah, personal communication, December 18, 2021). If such matters were beyond the powers of *Onowu Nwanyi*, they would be referred to the

Egwugwu, an ancestral masquerade cult that acted as the Supreme Court and whose verdict on any case was final and would never be challenged by anyone. The activities of the *Egwugwu* are conducted by a chief priest, *Okwute-nta*. The activities of the *Egwugwu* are shrouded in secrecy and never exposed to public discourse as it is considered taboo to do so.

The *Oga* held supreme powers and authority among the women gender and enjoyed certain exclusive rights and privileges. The *Oga* and *Eze* were privileged to dress in royal regalia during the *Ofor* and *Ini-Ozu*, second burial festivities when the *Egwugwu* masquerades made their appearances. During these festivals, it is forbidden for everybody including the eldest man Onihe Okakwu or Iyasele Onowu, the prime minister, men and titled women to put on dresses except the *Oga* and the *Eze*. During the *Ofor* (to mark the first appearance of the *Egwugwu*) and *Ini-Ozu* (the second burial of a titled man that marks the final act of appeasement entreating the dead to rest in peace and settle among his ancestors appear as an ancestral spirit) festivities, eight *Egwugwu*, ancestral spirits appeared and knelt to greet and sang special songs that were rendered in Igala language for the *Eze* and *Oga* extolling their royalty, eminence, virtues, and prowess seven times at their palace chambers (C.N. Anwasia, personal communication, December 17, 2021).

The *Oga* was greeted by both men and women as *Nneanyi Oga* (Our queen mother) three times at her palace to signify her prominence and royalty. The privileges accorded to the *Oga* by both humans and *Egwugwu*, ancestral spirits were marks of reverence. The *Oga* was an equivalent of the king or *Eze* (greeted as *Akor*) dressed like a man and possessed all the privileges, rights and prestige of the king. However, unlike the king, the *Oga* was not allowed to put on the *Okolobibi*, Ostrich feather, and beat the wooden talking gong, *Ufie* at her palace in demonstration of her royalty and splendour during the *Ulor* (marking the end of planting season) and *Iwaji* (new yam) festivities (P.E. Oranyeli, personal communication, December 18, 2021). Despite these differences between the *Oga* and *Eze*, the *Oga* was addressed as Her Royal Highness during the annual entry into the *Ime Okwule* (a sacred forest walled with palm fronts that served as the abode of the *Egwugwu* or *Nmor*) that appeared during *Ofor* and *Ini-Ozu*, (second burial) festivities. The *Oga* is superior to other women's title holders.

The titled women performed rituals and spiritual functions, especially during the *Ofor*, *Iwaji*, *Ini Ozu* and other festivities. The titled women of non-Odeaja descent in Oko were Ojeh, taken by women or *Umuada* of Umu-Odaneju quarters in Oko-Anala, Umu-Ngwu quarters in Oko-Ogbele and Uwaile-Isiani quarters in Oko-Amakom. Others were Oyete-Igala taken by women from Umu-Anagor

quarters in Oko Anala and Iyiochi taken by women from Umu-Uli quarters in Oko-Anala (C.N. Anwasia Mrs., A. A. Ndah & S. Owule, personal communication, December 18, 2021). These women title holders worked with the *Oga* in the administration of their villages.

The main function of the *Oga* was to foresee the affairs of women in society. Besides, her functions also involved ensuring that women observe and keep the traditional customs and practices that are geared towards the advancement of the dignity of womenfolk. The *Oga* was the head of the womenfolk and assisted by her cabinet members and the oldest women in the Oko society with titles such as *Onowu Nwanyi*, *Ogene*, *Iyete-Igala*, *Ochuwa*, and *Ojeh*. The *Oga* appointed and controlled the women's council of chiefs. The *Oga* acted in a dual capacity of both a man and a woman. She contributed to the social, economic, and political development of her society. The *Oga* entertained both men and women council of chiefs at the palace by providing food *Nni Ebo* during *Ulor* and *Iwaji* festivities, During the *Ofor* festival, the *Oga* provided native stewed fish or meat (*Iye-Akwukwor*) for women on the *Afor* day. On the demise of the family members, the *Oga* served the mourning food, *Unor-Akwa* during the burial. Although the *Oga* held supreme powers in the affairs of the womenfolk, she is excluded from ritual and spiritual matters performed by *Onowu Nwanyi* the head of the

Umuada, the *Ndinyum* (association of married women), and other women groups.

The *Oga* performed the annual entry of the sacred bush or abode of the *Egwugwu* or *Nmor* (*Ime Ofia* or *Okwule*) on the Afor day during the *Ofo* festival on a rotational basis with the king. *Oga* Ekpete Oranyeli reigned in parallel with the king, *Eze* Ogwuanyasi Oputa 1 in Oko-Anala. They rotated the annual entry into the sacred forest. While the king made the first royal entry into the sacred forest, the abode of the revered *Egwugwu* ancestral spirits during the *Ofo* festival that was celebrated in the fifth month every year, the *Oga* stayed at her palace, a family member took the native stew of fish/meat designated as *Akwukwor* to the sacred forest. The following year, it became the turn of the *Oga*. She visits the *Ime Okwule* in full royal regalia dressing like the king. Two significant features that make the *Oga* annual royal outing and entry into the *Okwule* is that traditionally, women including the oldest women, *Isi-Ada* or *Onowu Nwanyi* are forbidden from entering the sacred forest, *Okwule* (Researcher's observations during fieldwork). *Oga's* masculine status shows that power and authority are gendered and shared by men and women who were elevated to men's status.

The *Oga* usually dressed in full royal regalia with a red cap, while Onihe Okakwu, Onowu, the prime minister, and other elders including the *Okute-Ukwu* and *Okute-nta*, the senior and junior leaders who officiated and held the

highest positions in the *Egwugwu* ancestral spirit cult in Oko traditional institution were not allowed to put on dresses. It was taboo for anybody to do so, especially during the *Ofo* and *Ini-Osu* festivals when the *Egwugwu* or *Mmor* made their appearances, except the *Oga* and king, *Eze*. These exclusive privileges and rights symbolise their super-human nature and prominence in society. The *Oga*, sometimes, could attend meetings at the king's palace to represent the interests of the womenfolk and contribute significantly to deliberations and issues affecting society (P.N. Analo & P.E. Oranyeli, personal communication, December 18, 2021). She will not sit close to the king, but a few distance away from the king as a mark of respect to the king. The *Oga* must submit to the king, *Eze* whom she complements, supports, and is answerable to.

Due to the dual personality, the *Oga* represents in society, tradition allows the *Oga* to marry a wife and raise a family. *Oga* Ekpete Oranyeli married a wife and had four children, a boy and three girls. The wife served and took care of the *Oga* as her husband. By arrangement, *Oga's* wife could be pregnant through a male member of the family, but the children belong to the *Oga* and they are referred to as *Oga's* children and bear her family's name. Her children are members of the *Oga* family and enjoy all the rights and privileges of the family and lineage. After *Oga's* demise, her wife and children inherited

her property, and lands and they are allowed to live in the palace afterwards.

The burial rites of *Oga*

On demise, the *Oga* was buried in a sitting position to mark her/his royalty or highness even in death. The burial and final passage of rites were done at midnight by members of the elders' council, the *Ndichie* and *Oga*'s council of chiefs. Like the period of coronation, the burial of an *Oga* involves an elaborate ceremony and conduct of cultural rites for seven days. In each day, a cow is slaughtered as custom demands. The *Oga* is given a befitting burial in reverence for her majesty and royalty. It should be noted that the *Oga*'s burial is unique and different from other women including the women's title holders, whose burials last for two or three days.

The *Oga* could be accorded a second burial after three years of demise. In Oko tradition, the second burial (*Ini-Ozu*) is exclusively conducted for titled men only. In the case of the *Oga*, because she had transmogrified from a woman to a man during her lifetime and assumed the position of a woman monarch, the *Oga* was accorded a second burial which differed from other women and the men's burial. The second burial was meant to immortalise the *Oga*. Like the king, *Eze*, the *Oga*'s first and second burials lasted for seven days respectively. On the seventh day, the *Oga* appeared in the form of the *Egwugwu* masquerade adorned in royal regalia with gold ornaments and walked on a red carpet or

mat. After the second burial, the *Oga* could only appear during the second burial of any member of her family or near relation. The *Oga* through the second burial and reappearance in the *Egwugwu* masquerade is immortalised just like the king. The *Egwugwu* secret cult is based on the belief that dead males resurrect after their second burial and reappear in a masquerade, visit family, relatives, friends and live the visible ghost life, and finally return to *Idah* in *Igala*.

The activities of the *Egwugwu* are held sacred and strongly kept away from women and non-indigenes, but only made known to male adults and elders. It should be noted that the neighbouring towns of *Asaba*, *Ilah*, *Ebu*, *Okpanam*, and *Onitsha*, *Odekpe*, *Ossamala* east of River Niger based on their ancestral affinity share the sacredness of their religious beliefs (Isichei, 1976:160).

The *Oga* relationship with women groups: *Umuada*, deities and rituals

The *Oga* had cordial relationships with the *Umuada*, the daughters of the lineage, *Isi Ada* or *Onowu Nwanyi*, the oldest woman in the lineage or quarters based on gerontocracy. The *Oga* also related well with other women leaders from the non-Odeaja lineages such as *Ojeh*, *Ogene*, *Ochuwa* and *Iyete-Igala*. Although the *Oga* wielded enormous powers, tradition placed some limitations or restrictions on the extent to which she could function. One of the limitations was that the *Oga* must not break a kola-nut in the presence of the *Isi-Ada/Onowu Nwanyi* or

other women who were older than her. The *Oga* must not participate in the ritual performances of women such as the cleansing of the land (*Ani*) during festivals, or making sacrifices to the earth deity and other deities. These functions were the responsibilities of the *Onowu Nwanyi* and other women chieftains.

The *Oga*'s relationship with the *Omus*

The *Oga* had cordial personal relationships with other prominent women chieftains in Oko and beyond. Although there is no evidence to establish that the *Oga* had any relationship with the *Omu* of Asaba, Okpanam, Ibusa, Onitsha and other Anioma communities, it seems that the *Oga* interacted and networked with them, especially during meetings of traditional rulers convened by the government (P.E. Oranyeli, personal communication, December 18, 2021). However, oral sources have established that the *Oga* related more with the *Ochuwa*, a woman monarch in Odekpe in Ogbaru Local Government Area of Anambra State (A.A.Ndah, personal communication, December 18, 2021). The close relationship between the *Oga* and *Ochuwa* is not unconnected to the fact that Oko has ancestral ties and shares almost the same social, cultural and political institutions as Odekpe and Ossamala that trace their origins to Igala.

Unlike the *Omu* in other Anioma areas that were either elected or selected through divination as in the case of *Omu Asaba*

(Okocha, 2013), *Omu* of Ibusa and Okpanam (Esogbue 2016, Dieyi, 2001:79–82) including the *Omu* of Onitsha, (Biosah, 1974: 169) the *Oga* were not elected or selected by any divination (Okocha, 2013:177). Rather, the *Oga* is chosen by elders of the quarters who were from the Odeja lineage and presented to the villages for installation. This portends that a crowned *Oga* in one of the five quarters was accorded recognition by other quarters and villages in Oko. Unlike the *Omu*, who controlled the local markets, the *Oga* did not. It was the *Onowu Nwanyi* that controlled the *Olie* market located in front of the king's palace. Apart from the *Oga* and *Eze*, Oko has a common political institution with the *Onihe Okakwu*, spiritual head, *Diokpa* or *Okpala* of a lineage, *Ebo* or family based on the principle of primogenitor, as the spiritual head. This is applied to the women groups, *Umuada* with *Isi-Ada* or *Onowu Nwanyi/Ogene* as the head and other titled women.

Conclusion

Despite the patriarchal nature of African societies, it has been established that women were not powerless or voiceless as assumed in some quarters; rather they occupied prominent positions in the political institutions in the pre-colonial African kingdoms and states. Oko, like many other African and Igbo societies, practised patriarchy, but unlike many of them, established a dual-sex political institution as encapsulated in the *Oga* political institution that allows a woman to ascend the throne

that was equivalent to that of a king. The *Oga* institution originated from Idah in Igala and was introduced by the Odeaja descent to enable women to actively participate in the political administration of society. The *Oga* was a royal title conferred on the women of Odeaja descent, while other women's titles were bestowed on other women based on gerontocracy. Although the *Oga* possessed

supreme powers and authority, matters related to rituals, worship of gods or deities, cleansing of the land and related functions were carried out by the *Onowu Nwanyi* and the eldest woman. This suggests that the *Oga* possesses defined powers and authority that were mainly political or administrative devoid of spiritual or mythical powers.

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