

## [The Nature of Political Power in Igboland:](#)

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Women's & Gender History / Studies, Political History / Studies, African History / Studies, Area Studies, Rural History / Studies

### **The Nature of Political Power in Igboland: A Conference**

Jointly organized by Maria Angélica Bautista, Harris School of Public Policy, University of Chicago, USA; James A. Robinson, Harris School of Public Policy, University of Chicago, Chicago, USA; and Chima J. Korieh, Institute of African Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka

and hosted by The Institute of African Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka

February 17-18, 2022

One of the most important facts about African political development is the relative absence of large states along Eurasian lines. As Jan Vansina argued in *Paths in the Rainforests*, his political history of Central Africa, African communities innovated many types of institutions (in his argument, including lineages, clans and various types of association) to maintain the “autonomy of the local community”. For some reason African communities placed high value on autonomy and independence and/or they were particularly concerned about the abusive potential of centralized authority. Igbo society is a perfect example of how Africans organized themselves autonomously and democratically and resisted political centralization. This, despite the fact that the Igbo were surrounded by centralized states, most notably Benin in the west, but also Igala in the north. In this conference we would like to deepen our

understanding of these fundamental issues about African political development in the Nigerian, particularly Igbo, context.

Here are some basic questions of interest but we are also interested in other contributions which speak to these greater theme.

First, Vansina says that Central African communities wanted to be autonomous. How do we understand this desire at a deeper level? Can we see it in proverbs or the worldview or cosmology of the Igbo? Or was it rather that there was just some feature of Igbo society, such as the often discussed duality within villages (with its “balanced opposition”), that made it very difficult to centralize authority?

Second, it is not simply that Igbo society wanted to be autonomous, this had a powerful gender aspect. Women were autonomous from men, both economically and organizationally. How did this influence attitudes towards political centralization? Did men and women have different perspectives? How was this influenced by the organization of women in society, via associations or age grades?

Third, this question raises issues of what female empowerment means amongst the Igbo. It is easy to slip into western ideas about what women should aspire to or what the markers of discrimination or disempowerment are. We would like to interrogate this issue and understand how empowerment is manifested and is related to the organization of the economy, or institutions such as associations or age grades. What is it that Igbo women can achieve through their organization or autonomy that otherwise they could not?

Fourth, it is not uniformly true that “the Igbo have no king” because in the west more centralized political institutions emerged (particularly in Anioma). Traditions trace this to the migration of peoples from Benin (Onitsha, Oguta) and to a lesser extent from the Igala (Osomari). But why did such a model of political institutions not spread beyond the direct contact with Benin/Igala peoples?

Fifth, the pattern of political centralization within Igboland clearly reinforces the need to gender notions of autonomy. This is because it is in precisely in the western areas where institutions centralized that “dual sex” political systems emerged where women assumed political offices, like the Omu, in parallel to those of the men. This seems to have gone along with more institutionalized control of markets by women. Why did the spread of external models of political authority (e.g. Obi in Onitsha) create/ (in response?) such a unique set of female political institutions? Was this a

way for women, faced with men centralizing power, to institutionalize and thus preserve their own power?

Finally, these questions focus on traditional political institutions. Though to an extent these are still vibrant they have also been impacted by colonialism and post-colonial strategies of governance. For example, the Eze in most current Igbo communities is not a traditional political office. There are also completely modern institutions like the town union. How does the town union relate to the aladimma/Oha? The former is contemporary the latter is traditional. How should we conceptualize the colonial legacies? For instance, one sees in some communities (like Owerri) that families which were able to claim the position of warrant chief were able to create perpetual political power and influence. In others however, the abolition of the warrant chief system and the re-organization of colonial government in the 1930s and 1940s, led to no such persistence. Can we document and account for this variation?

We would like to explore these issues in comparative context: how does the situation in Igboland compare to that in surrounding societies? Both the more centralized like the Edo, Yoruba and Igala, but also the less centralized like the Ibibio or the Ijaw. For example, was it that the Edo people valued autonomy less and were prepared to tolerate greater political centralization? If so is that manifested in the culture or worldview of the Edo people? Or perhaps historically they were organized in ways which made it easier for centralization to be achieved (did they lack the dual organization of Igbo villages)? On the gender elements, is there a relationship between the Queen Mothers of Benin and the Omus of Anioma? Is there variation in basic aspects of women's autonomy such as in the agricultural economy, control of markets or associations such as the daughters (umuada)?

We believe this conference will provide a good opportunity to explore old question through a new lens. How can one understand these political and economic arrangements from their intersection with Igbo Worldview? As it appears, societal arrangements are impacted by Igbo spiritually and worldview. Does Igbo worldview and spirituality offer clues to the particular forms of political and economic systems that have developed among the Igbo. How are they gendered? And how do the role of women and men in these spheres offer some explanation for women's unique roles in Igbo society.

We are also interested in comparative papers focusing on other Nigerian groups such as the Yoruba, Edo, Igala, Tiv, Ibibio, among others.

Topics of Interest include but are not limited to:

- Political centralization and Decentralized Societies
- Igbo Social Institutions and Political Centralization
- Gender Ideology and Igbo Political Organization
- Gender and notions of autonomy
- Female empowerment among the Igbo
- The Igbo have no king-a misnomer
- Colonialism and Political reorganization

We invite scholars to send abstracts of no more than 300 words and a short biographical note (of 3-5 lines, including your current field of studies) to James A. Robinson, Harris School of Public Policy and Department of Political Science, University of Chicago at the following email address: [jamesrobinson@uchicago.edu](mailto:jamesrobinson@uchicago.edu) by the 6th of October 2021. Full paper must be submitted by 17 January 2022.

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