

Women as Custodians of Social Order and Community Welfare: The Historical Leadership of Nde Mgboto in Nigeria

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Abstract:

➤ Introduction

Indigenous women's institutions historically played important roles in governance, social regulation, and community welfare in many African societies. However, limited empirical studies have explored the leadership roles and influence of traditional women's institutions in Southeastern Nigeria. This study examined the historical leadership functions of Nde Mgboto in Oforola Ancient Kingdom, Imo State, Nigeria.

➤ Methods

The study employed a qualitative research design using purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Data were collected through face-to-face interviews among 90 elderly participants aged 70 years and above between 2019 and 2021. Secondary data were obtained from community records and oral historical accounts. Data were analyzed thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework.

➤ Results

The findings revealed that Nde Mgboto functioned as a judicial, moral, and spiritual authority within the community. Major themes identified included judicial and conflict resolution authority, oversight of widowhood and mourning practices, enforcement of moral and communal norms, and spiritual authority. The institution played significant roles in maintaining social cohesion, regulating behavior, resolving disputes, and preserving cultural values.

➤ Conclusion

The study demonstrates that indigenous women's institutions historically exercised multidimensional leadership and governance functions within patriarchal African societies. The findings contribute to gender studies, indigenous governance scholarship, and community welfare discourse by highlighting the role of women in promoting social order and cultural continuity in Oforola Ancient Kingdom.

Keywords: *Nde Mgboto, Women's Leadership, Indigenous Governance, Community Welfare, Oforola, Nigeria.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Leadership has been described in different ways across disciplines, yet most perspectives view it as a process through which individuals guide, influence, and inspire others toward the achievement of shared objectives. Effective leadership

involves vision, decision-making capacity, and the ability to mobilize people toward collective action (Kaiser et al., 2012; Obire & Eginwin, 2025). Within this broader discussion, female leadership refers to the contributions, practices, and leadership approaches demonstrated by women in organizational, political, and community settings.

Contemporary scholarship increasingly recognizes the importance of women's participation in leadership because of their contributions to governance, innovation, policy development, and social transformation (Chen et al., 2025; Zhiyu & Jingguo, 2025).

Academic interest in women's leadership emerged alongside feminist scholarship and expanded considerably during the latter half of the twentieth century. Early studies largely focused on identifying differences between male and female leadership styles, while later research explored structural barriers affecting women's access to leadership positions (Turock, 2001; Chen et al., 2025). Gender role theory suggests that societies often associate leadership with agentic characteristics traditionally attributed to men, whereas women are commonly linked with communal attributes such as empathy, cooperation, and relationship building (Eagly & Karau, 1991). These perceptions have contributed to persistent challenges for women seeking leadership positions. Role Congruity Theory further explains that prejudice may arise when expectations regarding women's social roles conflict with conventional assumptions about leadership (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Consequently, women frequently encounter barriers to advancement, including the widely discussed phenomenon of the glass ceiling (Cotter et al., 2001; Badura et al., 2018).

The leadership literature identifies numerous approaches to leadership, including trait, behavioural, situational, transactional, transformational, servant, authentic, path-goal, and leader-member exchange perspectives (Obire & Eginwin, 2025). Among these approaches, transformational leadership has attracted substantial scholarly attention because of its emphasis on inspiring positive change and motivating followers toward collective goals (Baker, 2023). Transformational leaders encourage commitment to shared values, stimulate innovative thinking, and promote personal development among followers (Burns, 1978; Bass, 1985). Studies have frequently reported that women demonstrate leadership behaviours associated with transformational leadership, including collaboration, empowerment, mentorship, and relationship-oriented management (Sharif, 2019; Stempel et al., 2015).

Although women's leadership has often been overlooked in patriarchal societies, historical evidence from Nigeria demonstrates that women have long contributed to governance, community welfare, and social development. Across southeastern Nigeria, women's organizations have played significant roles in mobilizing resources, supporting development initiatives, and influencing local decision-making processes. Following the Nigeria–Biafra War, for example, women's associations contributed to rebuilding community infrastructure and supporting development projects through organized collective action (Anah, 2014).

The experience of Oforola Ancient Kingdom offers a particularly important example of indigenous women's leadership. Despite the predominance of male authority structures, women organized themselves through recognized institutions that exercised influence over community affairs. Historical accounts indicate that women's associations participated in conflict resolution, welfare activities, social regulation, and cultural preservation. These institutions provided structured avenues through which women contributed to governance and community development.

Among the most prominent women's institutions in Oforola were Nde Mgboto and Nde Ndom. Oral histories and community records suggest that these organizations played complementary roles within the social structure of the community. Nde Mgboto was traditionally associated with dispute settlement, regulation of social conduct, protection of vulnerable persons, and the preservation of communal values, while Nde Ndom coordinated welfare-oriented and developmental activities that promoted collective well-being (Eboh, 2019; Onwumere, 2020; Obichere, 2021; Florence, 2021). Through these functions, women exercised recognized authority and contributed meaningfully to social stability and community governance.

Despite the historical significance of these institutions, scholarly documentation remains limited. Much of the available evidence is derived from oral accounts, community narratives, and local historical records. Consequently, there is insufficient empirical literature examining how such institutions functioned, how their authority was perceived, and how they contributed to social order within their communities. This gap is particularly evident regarding Nde Mgboto, whose judicial, moral, and cultural roles have received little systematic academic attention.

The present study addresses this gap by examining the historical leadership functions of Nde Mgboto in Oforola Ancient Kingdom. By documenting community perspectives and historical experiences, the study contributes to broader discussions on gender, indigenous governance, social regulation, and community welfare in Nigeria and Sub-Saharan Africa.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored on Transformational Leadership Theory and Role Congruity Theory. Transformational Leadership Theory, developed by Burns (1978) and expanded by Bass (1985), explains leadership as a process through which leaders inspire, influence, and motivate followers toward collective goals and social transformation. Transformational leaders often demonstrate moral authority, communal responsibility, and the ability to maintain social cohesion within society. The activities of Nde Mgboto reflected transformational leadership through conflict resolution, enforcement of communal ethics, regulation of

widowhood practices, and preservation of social order in Oforola Ancient Kingdom.

The study is also informed by Role Congruity Theory proposed by Eagly and Karau (2002), which explains how societal gender expectations shape perceptions of leadership roles. The theory argues that women are often perceived as less suitable for leadership positions because leadership is traditionally associated with masculine attributes. However, the historical existence of Nde Mgboto challenges such assumptions by demonstrating that women in indigenous African societies exercised recognized judicial, moral, and spiritual authority within their communities. The theory therefore provides a useful lens for understanding how women negotiated leadership, legitimacy, and authority within the patriarchal structure of Oforola Ancient Kingdom.

III. DATA AND MATERIALS

➤ *Research Design*

This study employed a qualitative research design to investigate the roles, leadership structures, and influence of Nde Mgboto, a traditional women’s institution in Oforola Ancient Kingdom. The qualitative approach enabled an in-depth exploration of participants’ lived experiences, oral histories, cultural practices, and perceptions regarding the judicial, moral, spiritual, and communal authority of Nde Mgboto.

➤ *Study Area*

The study was conducted in Oforola Ancient Kingdom, located in Owerri West Local Government Area of Imo State, Nigeria. The community consists of nine villages namely: Umueke, Umuagubiam, Umuadu, Umuobide, Oboagwa, Amorji, Umuimeka, Amaku, and Umuezeroke.

➤ *Study Population*

The study population comprised male and female elders, community leaders, and individuals with historical knowledge of the activities and leadership roles of Nde Mgboto within Oforola Ancient Kingdom.

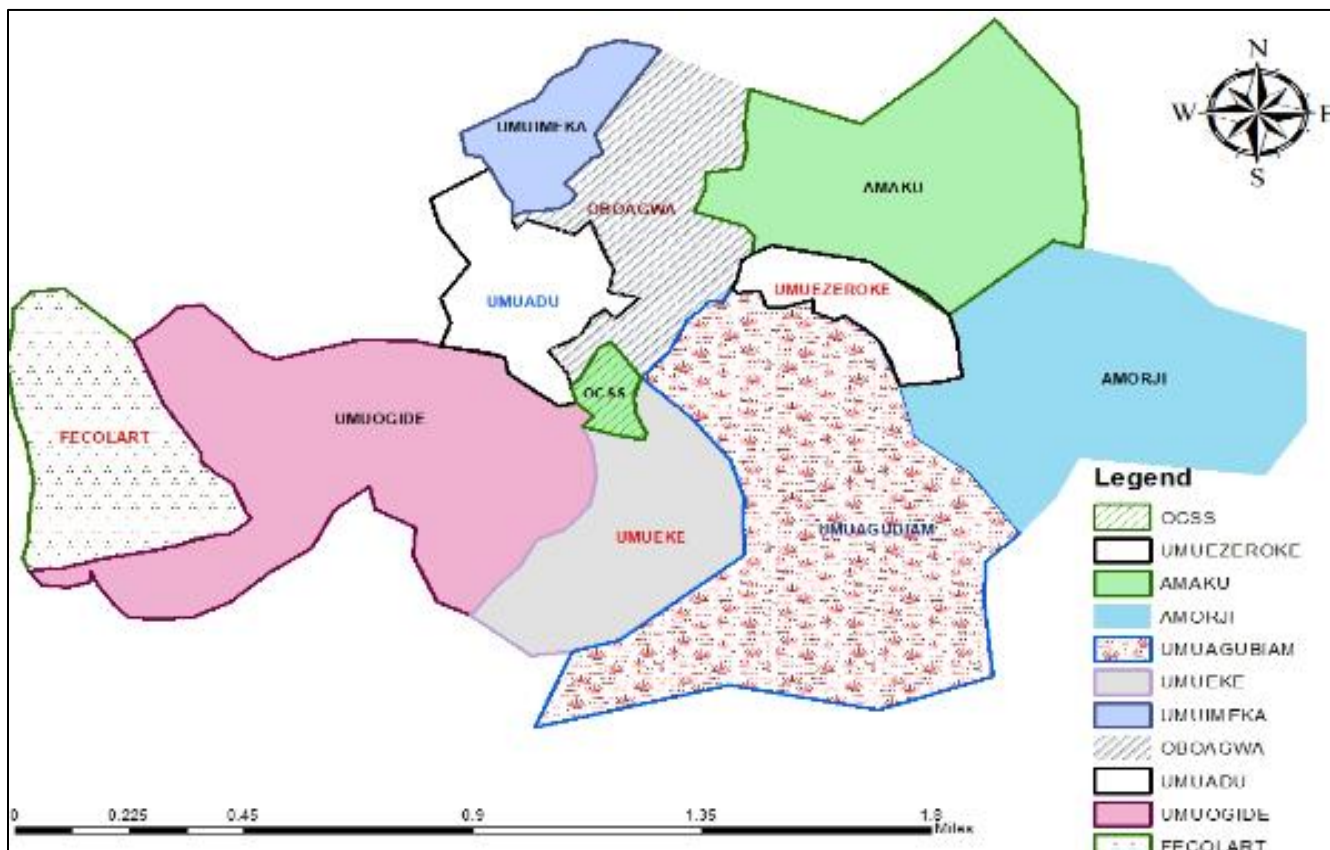


Fig 1 Oforola Ancient Kingdom Map Drawn with ArcGIS 10.8 and Field Coordinates for the Purpose of this Research in 2021 by the Corresponding Researcher.

➤ *Sampling Technique*

The study employed purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Purposive sampling was used to identify elders and community members who possessed knowledge about the

historical roles and influence of Nde Mgboto. Snowball sampling was further utilized where initial participants referred the researcher to other knowledgeable individuals within the community.

• *Inclusion Criteria*

Participants included in the study were:

- ✓ Elders aged 70 years and above;
- ✓ Community members with knowledge of the history and activities of Nde Mgboto;
- ✓ Individuals who were residents or indigenes of Oforola Ancient Kingdom;
- ✓ Participants willing to provide informed consent and participate in interviews.

• *Exclusion Criteria*

The study excluded:

- ✓ Individuals below 70 years with limited historical knowledge of Nde Mgboto;
- ✓ Non-indigenes without adequate understanding of Oforola cultural institutions;
- ✓ Participants unwilling to provide consent;
- ✓ Individuals unable to participate effectively due to severe illness or communication difficulties.

➤ *Sample Size*

A total of 90 participants were interviewed between 2019 and 2021. Participants consisted mainly of elderly men and women across the nine villages of Oforola Ancient Kingdom.

➤ *Sources of Data Collection*

Primary data was collected through face-to-face individual interviews from elders (n=90) between the ages of 70-120, from 2019 to 2021. The secondary data were collected from both community facebook group and the researcher’s facebook post feedback. Both primary and secondary data were utilized to collect qualitative data among the community for the research related to: (i) judicial and conflict resolution authority, (ii) Oversight of widowhood and mourning practices, (iii) enforcement of moral and communal norms (iv) spiritual and symbolic authority

IV. DATA ANALYSIS

The study utilized thematic analysis to examine interview responses and secondary historical materials.

Interview recordings and field notes were first transcribed and reviewed repeatedly to ensure familiarity with the data. During this process, recurring ideas, experiences, and patterns relating to the activities and leadership roles of Nde Mgboto were identified.

The researcher subsequently assigned codes to relevant segments of the data and grouped similar codes into broader categories. These categories were carefully examined to identify themes that captured the major functions, responsibilities, and influence of the institution within the community. Emerging themes were continuously compared with the original transcripts to ensure consistency and accuracy of interpretation.

The final themes were refined, defined, and organized according to their relevance to the study objectives. Supporting quotations from participants were incorporated to illustrate the perspectives and experiences shared during the interviews. The analysis process was guided by the thematic analysis principles proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), enabling a systematic exploration of the historical leadership roles of Nde Mgboto in Oforola Ancient Kingdom.

➤ *Trustworthiness of the Study*

To ensure credibility and trustworthiness, the researcher used prolonged community engagement, triangulation of oral narratives with secondary community records, and participant verification of selected interpretations. Consistency in coding and thematic categorization was maintained throughout the analysis process.

➤ *Ethical Clearance*

Ethical approval of the study was obtained orally from the elders. The researcher protected the anonymity and confidentiality of individuals that participated in answering the questionnaires and assured that the information given were kept confidential. The ethical considerations informed the respondents about the purpose of the study to obtain an informed consent before interviews were conducted.

V. RESULTS

Table 1: Themes, Sub-Themes, and Illustrative Practices of Nde Mgboto Leadership

Theme	Sub-theme	Illustrative practices
judicial and Conflict Resolution Authority	Family & Kindred disputes	Mediates disputes when local mechanisms fail; decisions are binding
	Pronouncement of judgments	Investigates cases thoroughly and pronounces final judgments
Oversight of Widowhood and Mourning Practices	Assessment of widow conduct	Investigates how wives treated husbands before death; determines fines or mourning privileges
	Regulation of mourning	Controls seating, crying times, and adherence to mourning rituals
	Supervised rituals	Mandates eating restrictions (broken plates, sticks), hair rituals, ceremonial cleansing
	Ritual cleansing & reintegration	Performs incantations to absolve widows, allowing social

		reintegration
Enforcement of Moral and Communal Norms	Domestic responsibilities	Monitors wives' care for husbands, household duties, and community obligations
	Sanctions for non-compliance	Imposes fines, restrictions, or public censure for violations of norms
	Cultural compliance	Supervises foreign married women to ensure adherence to community traditions
Spiritual and Symbolic Authority	Supernatural influence	Authority believed to invoke spirits/deities to enforce compliance
	Community recognition	Decisions are respected as morally and spiritually binding, reinforcing legitimacy

VI. QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

The thematic qualitative analysis followed Braun and Clarke 2006 outlined steps. The thematic analysis was done by familiarization, Generating initial codes, Searching for themes, Reviewing of themes, Defining and naming themes and use of direct quotes from the affected individuals.

The thematic analysis presents the findings from a study on the roles and influence of Nde Mgboto, a traditional women's institution in Oforola Ancient Kingdom.

➤ Theme 1: Judicial and Conflict Resolution Authority

Nde Mgboto functioned as a judicial authority within the community, mediating conflicts at family, kindred, and village levels. Their role extended beyond routine dispute resolution, as they were often called upon when local mechanisms failed. Through careful investigation, they determined appropriate sanctions, fines, or restrictions, and their decisions were widely recognized as binding. One of community members described the Mgboto as a judicial committee, stating:

"When disagreements cannot be resolved, the Mgboto are invited to settle the matter, and their judgment is final." (Elder female, Umuagubiam).

In addition, three other respondents reported: *"Their authority encompassed both married and foreign women, ensuring that family obligations—particularly care for husbands during sickness—were upheld." (Elder, female, Amorji)*

"They serve as judicial authorities embedded in cultural and spiritual beliefs" (Elder, male, Umuezeroke)

"Before the conflict resolution of Umuokanne and Oforola, Nde mgboto played critical roles in supporting their husbands during that periods of communal conflict." (Elder man, umuezeroke)

➤ Theme 2: Oversight of Widowhood and Mourning Practices

A one of the central role of Nde Mgboto was regulating mourning and widowhood practices. They investigated how

wives treated their husbands before death to determine whether mourning privileges, fines, or restrictions were warranted. Their oversight included highly ritualized behaviors, such as supervised crying, eating restrictions, and ceremonial cleansing. One of community member interviewed stated:

"Widows were required to cry at prescribed times, eat from broken plates, or use sticks to scratch their bodies until Mgboto verified their conduct towards their late husbands" (elder, female, Amorji.).

Another community member also stated: *"Rituals performed by Mgboto, including placing hands on the widow's hair and conducting cleansing ceremonies, symbolically absolved widows of any perceived wrongdoing and allowed them to resume normal social participation". (Elder, male, Umuogide)*

➤ Theme 3: Enforcement of Moral and Communal Norms

Nde Mgboto enforced ethical, moral, and communal standards within Oforola. They ensured that domestic responsibilities, particularly the care of husbands and household duties, were observed. Non-compliance led to fines and restrictions. An elder man said:

"The Mgboto were described as upholding traditions and community values. They enforce rules for women, particularly married women from outside the community, to maintain moral standards." (Elder, male, Amaku).

Another respondent said: *"some women suffered from the leadership of Nde mgboto, their sanctions and restriction were not favorable to some of us" (Elder, female, Umuogide)*

➤ Theme 4: Spiritual and Symbolic Authority

The authority of Nde Mgboto was both judicial and spiritual, with decisions believed to invoke supernatural forces that could favor or punish individuals. Their influence was thus deeply intertwined with the spiritual and cultural fabric of Oforola.

Community members widely recognized the supernatural dimension of Mgboto authority.

Three respondents said: *“Their words are highly respected; it is said they possess supernatural powers that influence outcomes in the community.”* (Elder, Male, Umuezeroke)

“They meet at a place called Ushi Mgboto, is a kind of shrine. They are well respected because the community believe that they can invoke supernatural powers against or for someone” (elder male, Oboagwa). This belief in spiritual backing enhanced compliance and reinforced their legitimacy.

“They maintained peace in the community, people were afraid, no one wants them to swear or cause them. They possess authority” (Elder, female, Umuimeka)

VII. DISCUSSION

The findings reveal that Nde Mgboto occupied a significant position within the governance structure of Oforola Ancient Kingdom. The institution exercised authority in judicial matters, cultural regulation, social welfare, and spiritual affairs, demonstrating that women played active leadership roles within the community despite the broader patriarchal context. These findings contribute to growing scholarship that recognizes indigenous women's institutions as important actors in community governance and social development.

➤ *Judicial Authority and Community Governance*

One of the most prominent functions of Nde Mgboto was dispute resolution. Community members described the institution as a respected body whose decisions carried considerable authority. By mediating conflicts and ensuring adherence to communal expectations, the institution contributed to social stability and peaceful coexistence. These findings support arguments that women's leadership can play a vital role in promoting justice, reconciliation, and collective responsibility within traditional societies (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

➤ *Widowhood and Mourning Practices*

The study further revealed that Nde Mgboto exercised oversight over widowhood and mourning rituals. Through the supervision of cultural practices associated with bereavement, the institution ensured conformity with established communal norms. Although some of these practices may be viewed differently in contemporary society, they historically served as mechanisms for regulating social behavior and preserving cultural traditions. Similar observations have been reported in studies examining women's organizations in southeastern Nigeria (Anah, 2014).

➤ *Moral Regulation and Social Responsibility*

The institution also functioned as a guardian of moral standards within the community. Participants emphasized its role in monitoring family responsibilities, promoting acceptable conduct, and imposing sanctions when communal expectations were violated. Such functions reinforced social

order and strengthened collective accountability. These findings align with previous studies suggesting that female leadership structures often emphasize social cohesion, welfare, and community-oriented values (Sharif, 2019).

➤ *Spiritual Legitimacy and Authority*

Another important finding concerns the spiritual dimension of Nde Mgboto's authority. Community members believed that the institution possessed supernatural influence capable of rewarding compliance and discouraging misconduct. This spiritual legitimacy strengthened respect for the institution and enhanced adherence to its decisions. The findings suggest that traditional governance in Oforola was shaped not only by social and cultural norms but also by deeply rooted spiritual beliefs that reinforced leadership authority. (Obichere, 2021; Florence, 2021).

Overall, the findings demonstrate that Nde Mgboto represented a multidimensional leadership institution that combined judicial, moral, cultural, and spiritual responsibilities. The institution contributed significantly to social regulation, conflict management, cultural continuity, and community welfare, highlighting the historical importance of women's leadership within indigenous African governance systems.

➤ *Implications:*

- The *Nde Mgboto* institution demonstrates that female leadership in traditional African societies was both normative and transformational, challenging modern stereotypes of gendered power limitations.
- Their multifaceted authority—judicial, moral, and spiritual—provides a model for understanding how women can exercise leadership in culturally embedded ways, balancing community development, social justice, and cultural preservation.

➤ *Limitations*

Despite providing valuable insights into the leadership roles of Nde Mgboto, the study has several limitations. First, the study relied largely on oral histories and community narratives, which may be influenced by selective memory, recall bias, and subjective interpretation of historical events. Secondly, some ritual practices and traditional institutions discussed are no longer actively practiced, limiting opportunities for direct observation and verification.

The study also focused primarily on elderly participants aged 70 years and above who possessed historical knowledge of the institution, which may not fully represent the perspectives of younger generations within the community. Furthermore, the qualitative nature of the study limits generalization of the findings beyond Oforola Ancient Kingdom.

VIII. STUDY SIGNIFICANCE AND CONTRIBUTION

This study contributes significantly to the fields of gender studies, indigenous governance, African history, and community leadership by documenting the historical leadership roles of Nde Mgboto in Oforola Ancient Kingdom. The study expands scholarly understanding of indigenous women's institutions as active systems of governance, social regulation, and cultural preservation within patriarchal African societies.

The findings further contribute to public health and community welfare discussions by demonstrating how women's institutions historically promoted social cohesion, conflict resolution, moral regulation, and protection of vulnerable groups such as widows. The study also preserves valuable oral histories and cultural knowledge that may otherwise be lost due to modernization and generational transitions. Additionally, the research provides a foundation for future comparative studies on indigenous women's leadership structures in Africa.

IX. CONCLUSION

The study highlights the significant role of *Nde Mgboto* in Oforola as a transformational, custodial, and culturally embedded female leadership institution. Their authority encompassed judicial mediation, enforcement of moral and communal norms, supervision of widowhood and mourning practices, and spiritual guidance. The Mgboto not only maintained social cohesion and ethical conduct but also reinforced cultural continuity and community development. Their leadership challenges conventional stereotypes of gendered power limitations and demonstrates that women historically held consequential, multidimensional authority in patriarchal societies. This study recommends documentation and preservation of the practices, rituals, and adjudicatory procedures of *Nde Mgboto* to preserve cultural heritage and institutional knowledge, expanded sample scope to include larger more respondents from all the villages of the community and also conduct a comparative studies with other women's leadership style with the country, state or local government.

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