

# IS THE AFRICAN MOTHER "NNEKA", STILL SUPREME?

## Fireworks from the May 2007 Igbo Women's Conference in Aba

by Sabine Jell-Bahlsen, Berlin, Germany - Special to African Profiles USA & Globe

*Back from the International Women's Conference of the First Festival on Igbo Civilization In Commemoration of 50 years of Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart.*

In 2008-2009, the Igbo people of Nigeria and in the Diaspora are celebrating the 50ies anniversary of Things Fall Apart, the major contribution by their own Chinua Achebe to world literature. Nigeria hosted a vast array of events on the occasion: The 1st

on Arts and Culture at Enugu, a Youth Conference, and a Conference of the Traditional Rulers, among other significant events.

The International Women's Conference took place at the historic venue of Aba, May 5-7, 2009. The event was at once concise, well-orchestrated, beautiful, and thought provoking; it was topped by an excursion to Nchara Oloko, Ikwuano LGA, to commemorate and honour the Great Lioness, late Madame Ikonna Nwayiukwu Enyia (1877-1989), the former Nchara women's leader, who was one of the founders and leader's of the legendary Igbo women's war,



Orji, the Executive Governor of Abia State was the Chief Host, and HE Chief Mrs. Mercy Odochi Orji, Wife of the Governor of Abia State was the Mother of the Conference. Further attending dignitaries were HE Comrade Chris Akomas, the Deputy Governor of Abia State; HE Uchechi Chris Akomas, Wife of the Deputy Governor of Abia



Sabine Jell-Bahlsen at the conference; Chair, Dr-Catherine Acholonu; and Chief (Mrs.) Uchechi Akomas, Abia deputy governor's wife, arriving

Festival on Igbo Civilization culminated in Achebe's own presentation of the famed Ahiajoku Lecture at Owerri in January 2009. I was honoured to be among the invited presenters at the 1st International Conference on Igbo Civilization at Owerri in January 2009, and again, at the International Women's Conference at Aba, in February, both part of the 1st Festival on Igbo Civilization, as were the Festival

of 1929,[1] aka Aba "resistance," or "revolt" in colonial lingua.

Prof. Catherine Acholonu was the Chairperson of the Igbo Women's Conference. It hosted a number of extraordinary personalities: HE Dame Patience Goodluck Jonathan, wife of the Vice President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria was the Chief Guest of Honour, while HE Chief T.A.

State; Elder Chief Mrs. Eunice Uzor Kalu, Special Guest of Honour; and further Guests of Honour were HE Mrs. Margaret Obi, Wife of the Governor of Anambra State; HE Chief Mrs. Josephine Elechi, Wife of the Governor of Ebonyi State, HE Mrs. Clara Chibuzo Chime, Wife of the Governor of Enugu State, HE Barr. (Lady) Chioma Ohakim, Wife of the Governor of Imo State. Chairmen of

the Occasion were Ambassador Raph Uwechue (OFR), President General of Ohaneze Ndigbo, and Dr. Paschal Dozie, Chairman, Honorary Committee. Prof. T. Uzodinma Nwala was the Chairman of the Planning Committee. Mrs. Nkolika Kalu Nsi, Permanent Secretary, Min. of Women Affairs, Abia State, was Chairman LOC.

The Archbishop of the Methodist Archdiocese of Umuahia, His Grace Dr. Rogers Uwadi offered opening prayers during the opening ceremony, followed by breaking of kola nuts and opening remarks by the Chairman, Amb. Raph Uwechue (OFR), address by the Chairman of the National Planning Committee, Prof. Nwala, and the keynote speech by the Chairperson, Women's Conference, Prof. Catherine Acholonu. Chief Mrs. Mercy Odochi Orji, Mother of the conference delivered a welcome address followed by goodwill messages from the wives of



*Chief Dr. Maria Okpo, Woman leader of WIC and former commissioner for women affairs, Enugu State.*

the five eastern state governors. An entertaining interlude featured a drama on the "1929 Aba Women's resistance." HE, Mrs. Dame Patience Goodluck Jonathan, Wife of the Vice President presented an Address, after which the Chief host, Chief Theodore Ahamofe Orji, the governor of Abia State declared the conference open.

The two-day academic pro-

gramme presented a broad spectrum of high-quality papers, including: Prof. T.N. Kanno, Igbo Culture and Civilization and the gender Question; Prof. C. Acholonu, Women exclusionism Igbo Life and Culture: Matters Arising from Achebe's 2009 Ahiajoku Lecture (Keynote speech); Dr. Sabine Jell-Bahlsen, Women Sustaining Igbo Culture and Progress: Reflections on Select Novels by Chinua Achebe and Chimamanda Adichie; Barr. Mrs. Stella Odife, Igbo Women in National Politics; Prof. Mrs. Nwozuzu, Towards the Preservation of Igbo Language and Culture; Chief Chinkwe Ndimele, 1929 Aba Women's Riots: Facts and Recollections; Prof. T. Uzodinma Nwala, Gender and Igboness: Common History, Values, Problems and Aspirations as a People; Prof. N.B. Onyike, Women, Spirituality and Ethical Re-Orientation Towards Moral Restitution in the Igbo Society; Prof. Nwadiuto Onofeghara, Women as Drivers of Positive Change in Igbo Life, Culture and Civilization; Prof. Dick O. Uduma, Igbo Women and Governance in Nigerian Politics: A Historical Perspective; Prof. Mkpa A. Mkpa, Women as Peace Makers in the Home and within the Large Community; Caroline Ijeoma Njoku, Deconstructing the Masculine Centre in Achebe's Things Fall Apart. Some papers were presented at partially in Igbo, and the required use of the Igbo language at future Igbo women's conferences was discussed.

Presenters and guests were graciously hosted in three comfortable, high standard local hotels, even though there was a misunderstanding about food and check out time at the Luxury Hotel, as a result of which some walked out of the auditorium in protest. The participants enjoyed free luncheons and a Gala Night, and entertain-

ment by a local band. Furthermore, an exhibit featured books, as well as local products and crafts for sale, such as high quality samples of the famed Akwete woven cloth. The cultural group, Ada Igbo of the Igbo Amaka Foundation, who educate children (at schools etc) about proper Igbo dress and cultural codes of conduct, provided entertainment. The tireless High Chief Ifunanya Chukwu, P.R. Abraham took pictures throughout the event and made prints available immediately. As hospitality is greatly valued in Igbo culture, barrister Olunkwa Michael Ifeanyi, who was in charge of hospitality chaperoned the foreign visitor (me). At the end of the conference, HE Uchechi Chris Akomas, the wife of the Deputy Governor of Abia State presented a gracious gift from HE Chief Mrs. Mercy Odochi Orji, wife of the Governor of Abia State and Mother of the Conference to me.

Concluding the conference, the women resolved to continue holding an International Igbo Women's Conference annually. Furthermore, it was decided that the Igbo Women's Conference would continue promoting the Igbo language and that papers or at least synopses of the papers should be presented in Igbo at these future meetings. In particular, pain was expressed about at the occasional misuse of the kola nut ritual to denigrate the female gender, since kola nut represents unity, love, and communion.

The conference was formally declared closed by HE Uchechi Chris Akomas, wife of the Deputy Governor of Abia State.

Afterwards, I briefly staid at Owerri and was again graciously hosted by Dr. Catherine Acholonu. We visited the remarkable open air Mbari museum of the Imo State Council of Arts and Culture. Then, on my way to the airport, travelling

with Nneka, daughter of the late Chief Francis Ebiri of Orsu-Obodo, I stopped by the local museum, hoping for a classic art exhibit. Instead, we found a highly instructive display on malaria featuring life size replicas of people in their hospital beds, ample information on malaria carrying mosquitoes, prevention and treatment options, and educative hand-out brochures.

A special presentation on traditional medicines featured various herbs and substances used by village herbalists, who



*Federal presence: Wife of the Nigerian Vice President, Chief (Mrs) Patience Goodluck and Hostess: Wife of the Governor of Abia State, Chief (Mrs.) Mercy Odochi Orji*

have long treated patients in rural areas and helped people, who could not afford Western medical

treatment. Nneka and I exchanged sad looks: The renowned herbalist Eze Mmiri, who treated many patients in Nneka's village, is late without a surviving son. What is more, in 2006 the elderly widow was accused of witchcraft by fanatic Charismatic Christians and driven from her home by her own step children. -- Is Mother still supreme in Igbo-land?

*(From the international Women's Conference of the First Festival on Igbo Civilization, In Commemoration of 50 years of Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart. Presented by the Abia State Government in collaboration with Ohanaeze Ndigbo. Theme: "neka: Mother is Supreme - Women as Agents of Ethical*



*Pictured from left, Victoria Njoku, wife of Eze Njoku, the local king of Aba (traditional ruler) and proprietary of a primary school; Adigbo; Cultural group, Ada Igbo educating children (at schools etc) about proper Igbo dress and cultural codes of conduct. Igbo Amaka Foundation.*



*Pictured from left, Administrative secretary of Ohaneze and wife, Chief Aniodinze (Nnaneru Nnanyere Ugo) Commissioner Maria Okpo marching near riot at Luxury Hotel about food. Governor's wife called, ordered them out in the morning, not, they walked out of the auditorium. Protesters included high class women in protest march. Wife of the VP of Nigeria, HE Patience Goodluck*