



**Moremi Ajasoro, Inikpi of Igala, and Iyoba Idia:
Celebrating the Agency and Voice of Precolonial African
Heroines for Today's African Consecrated Women**

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Abstract

African scholarship has long recognized the important roles women played in politics, religion, and the economy in precolonial Africa, aiming to inspire modern African women. However, little focus has been placed on how these historical contributions can be adapted to address the challenges and opportunities faced by religious women today. This paper examines stories of African heroines such as Moremi Ajasoro, Inikpi of Igala, and Queen Mother Iyoba Idia of Benin, demonstrating how these women embodied powerful voices and agency, breaking barriers to become leaders, warriors, economic figures, and spiritual custodians, thereby showing how modern women can draw inspiration from their agency to challenge gender stereotypes and foster new opportunities. Using an Afrocentric hermeneutic, the research critiques the dominance of Western Christianity's patriarchal, male-centered gender roles—which often reduce women's roles to domestic symbols—while overlooking the significant contributions of priestesses, female healers, and leaders in African history who influenced politics, culture, religion, and economics. By confronting patriarchal norms that restrict gender roles and diminish women's agency, the study advocates for including the stories of precolonial African female heroines into African Christian theology. Such integration can help reshape church structures, female spirituality, and leadership models. Ultimately, this work aims to develop a more relevant,

inclusive theology of consecrated life—one that affirms resilient identities, promotes equality, and empowers women in their spiritual missions.

Keywords - *Moremi Ajasoro, Inikpi of Igala, Queen Mother Iyoba Idia, African female heroines, African consecrated women, patriarchy, theology of consecrated life.*

I. Introduction

Stories about Saints Scholastica (sister of Saint Benedict), Monica (mother of Saint Augustine), Mary Magdalen, Mary of Egypt, Theresa of the Child Jesus, Teresa of Ávila, Bridget of Sweden, and Catherine of Siena tell the tales of women who in different epochs and times transformed the trajectories and expectations within the context of changing social and mental attitudes toward women. Their narratives range from periods when there was no defined model for a woman saint, to times when women achieved sainthood as proxies—through their roles as wives or mothers of renowned men who became saints—to periods where women earned sainthood through love and tears, and to period of enclosed nuns who attained holiness via their personal union with God, prophetic voices, and virginity. Some women sought sainthood through a mix of aristocratic pride and a desire to renounce worldly wealth and power, reflecting the evolving spiritual trends of their eras.¹

Of importance here is that, at different stages in the development of feminine sainthood, the transformative experiences were

¹ André Vauchez, “Between Virginity and Spiritual Espousals: Models of Feminine Sainthood in the Christian West in the Middle Ages,” *Medieval History Journal* 2, 2 (1999): 349-359.

conversations and conversions that aligned with the new ideas and ways of seeing realities at the time. In context, there were also periods when women who later became saints were known for their powerful prophetic voices, political influence, and evangelical freedom. Saint Margaret of Cortona, Saint Clara of Montefalco, the Blessed Angela da Foligno, and Kathreen of Siena are models of this feminine spirituality.²

In contemporary times, it is very uncommon to find consecrated women participating in the political and social life of communities and societies, such as advocacy, campaigns, public protests, digital engagement, public debates, and community involvement, which are ways to engage with government, influence politics, and the people. *Vita Consecrata* defines the consecrated life as ‘a gift of God the Father to his Church through the Holy Spirit’.³ Seen from this perspective, the religious life is characterized by strict separation from the world and dedication to contemplative prayer. According to *Perfectae Caritatis*, “the primary purpose of the consecrated Life is union with God, to which both contemplation and apostolic zeal must be directed.”⁴ Hence, commentaries on consecrated life, as well as the Constitutions of different religious orders, are developed and sometimes revised with the sole aim of ensuring deeper fidelity to the Gospel, to the church, and to the religious orders.

While Christian theology provides the worldview or spiritual/mental lenses through which to understand the theology of the consecrated life, it imposes practical and shared perceptions of the religious life rooted in a combination of cultural, patriarchal, and conservative

² Vauchez, “Between Virginité and Spiritual Espousals,” 358.

³ John Paul II, *Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, Consecrated Life and its Mission in the Church and in the World: Vita Consecrata*, no. 1.

⁴ *Perfectae Caritatis*, October 28, 1965, 5

interpretations of gender roles. In fact, the limitation of the apostolates of religious communities to works of charity, caregiving, and teaching reflects adherence to dominant notions about the nature, expectations, and place of women in society. This is a common idealization of Western gender roles that restrict women, giving them limited freedom and space to influence their social, spiritual, and political systems.

In many instances, these patriarchal ideologies have reduced religious women to passive spectators and voices in a world where many women suffer from gender-based harm or violence, where many women lack the mindset, courage, agency, and resilience needed for women to define their own path to commitment, leadership and involvement that can be culturally authentic, liberating, and empowering for African communities.⁵

Selena C. Baugh discusses how Western Christianity has influenced gender roles, often reinforcing inequality via creation stories, designated roles (church versus home), or cultural enforcement. She also notes that the Church is gradually offering opportunities for women's empowerment through community involvement, agency, and challenging traditional interpretations, resulting in a complex dynamic of marginalization and possibilities for transformation.⁶ However, this effort to assuage the many effects of patriarchal presuppositions on gender relationships and sex roles is not bringing the desired result in the African context because of its superficial discontinuity with the African people in their beliefs, values, and traditions.

⁵ See also Selena C. Baugh, "On Divinity and Marginalization: Western Christianity and African Spirituality as Impetuses of Gender In/Equality," *Perceptions* 5 No. 2 (2019): Freedom Through Truth, <https://doi.org/10.15367/pj.v5i2.195>

⁶ Baugh, "On Divinity and Marginalization."

Recently, the Church has expressed its concern about increasing people's involvement in its legislation, urging everyone to embrace and practice synodality through communion, participation, and mission as ways of being, living, and leading within a Church understood as the Family of God. This synodal approach to the participation of men and women in the Church's discernment and decision-making is not a new phenomenon among Africans. We must emphasize that the focus on Western values or belief systems has caused an overreliance on 'foreign epistemologies that continue to define African realities.' At the same time, we stereotype our view of African traditions and values.⁷

African indigenous beliefs and traditions did not reduce women to symbols of domesticity. Women were empowered to lead and participate actively in public, social, and economic life. In Africa's oral tradition, numerous stories highlight women as symbols of strength, agency, and leadership, serving as mediators, repositories, sustainers, and transmitters of religious, social, and political traditions. Figures like Moremi Ajasoro, *Inikpi* of Igala, and Queen *Idia* of Benin Kingdom are celebrated as notable queens of Nigeria, admired for their resilience, firmness, heroism, military prowess, and influence.

These women could serve as models for the consecrated religious, exemplifying bravery, sacrifice, and dedication, and significantly shaping pre-Christian African society through fostering inspiring values. Their legacies can serve as meaningful references for discussions of women's courage, sacrifice, and service in

⁷ Cardinal Ihejirika, "Harnessing African Indigenous Knowledge Systems for Knowledge Production: A Redefinition of a Culture-Centric Epistemology," *Journal of Contemporary Philosophical and Anthropological Studies (JCPAS)* Vol.2 Issue 1 (2024): 1-14, 1.

leadership, identity formation, and missionary experiences—especially for consecrated women. Their contributions can be seen as an incarnate template for what the religious can model, especially when we engage in dialogue between Christian teachings, African traditions, and our social realities. The point is that the voice, power, authority, and presence of consecrated women in our time cannot be completely disconnected from the truth of African women's precolonial past and the African existential realities.

2. African Cultural Context in Biblical Hermeneutics of Consecrated Life

African epistemologies and context can readily be part of our sources for biblical hermeneutics of consecrated life. In fact, for Christian theology to remain relevant to African faith and practice, it must be approached in close dialogue with African traditions and religious experiences, considering both the similarities and differences in cultural epistemologies with those of the West. Of importance is that this concern is gradually taking a central place in biblical scholarship. The pioneer works of Justin Ukpong, David Tuesday Adamo, Andrew M. Mbuvi, Gerald O. West, as well as the collection of articles in Gerald O. West and Musa Dube, eds., *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories and Trends* has critiqued the dominant ideologies used to interpret sacred texts, offering scientific traditions that can be used contextually to engage African worldviews in biblical scholarship.⁸

⁸ David Tuesday Adamo, "What Is African Biblical Hermeneutics?" *Black Theology* 13 (April, 2015): 59–72; Andrew M. Mbuvi, "African Biblical Studies: An Introduction to an Emerging Discipline," *Currents in Biblical Research* 15 (February, 2017): 149–178; Gerald O. West, "On the Eve of an African Biblical Studies: Trajectories and Trends," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 99 (November, 1997): 99–115;

While this shift is becoming paradigmatic and defining for African scholarship, the use of African Hermeneutics (epistemologies, philosophy, traditions, and culture) for the consecrated life remains peripheralized. Significantly, there are contributions of Africans to the biblical epistemologies, philosophies, and theologies of consecrated life. So far, these studies have focused on various topics, such as how African consecrated persons can embrace the biblical notions of Hope, Conversion, and Reconciliation,⁹ how the African idea of family can become a locus for reflection for the consecrated life,¹⁰ how the prophetic role of the religious could be of great importance to the Church and society,¹¹ or how the African models of communalism can become authentic models for religious communities.¹²

Gerald O. West, "Unpacking the Package That Is the Bible in African Biblical Scholarship," in *Reading the Bible in the Global Village*, ed. Justin S. Ukpong (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002), 65-94; Gerald O. West and Musa Dube, eds., *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories and Trends* (Boston: Brill, 2001); Justin S. Ukpong, "Rereading the Bible with African Eyes: Inculturation and Hermeneutics," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 91 (1995): 3-14.

⁹ Ikechukwu Anthony Kanu, "Consecrated Persons and the Jubilee: Embracing Hope, Conversion and Reconciliation," *The Catholic Voyage: African Journal of Consecrated Life* Volume 22, No. 1 (2025): 98-129; Kenyuyfoon, Gloria Wirba, "The Religious Women's Contribution to Peace, Justice and Reconciliation in Africa," *African Ecclesial Review* 51 & 52 (2009): 518-531.

¹⁰ Ikechukwu Anthony Kanu, "The Concept of 'Family' as the Contribution of Africa to the Consecrated Life," *IGWEBUIKE: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities* Vol. 3 No 3 (April 2017): 78-87.

¹¹ Gloria Wirba, "The Prophetic Role of African Religious Women to the Mission of the Church and the Building of their Society," *Global Sisters Report* (March 12, 2015), <https://www.globalsistersreport.org/trends/prophetic-role-african-religious-women-mission-church-and-building-their-society-21526> (accessed November 26, 2025).

¹² Agatha C. Kunuba, "Towards an Authentic Religious Community: Models from African Communalism," *The Catholic Voyage: African Journal of Consecrated Life* Vol. 11 (2015): 119-125.

These studies, though critical for incorporating African worldviews into the philosophies and theologies of consecrated life, do not address deeper issues facing African women, particularly the lack of agency needed for a consecrated woman to recognize injustices and confront them in a religio-cultural patriarchal society that enforces taboos and creates obstacles for women's survival, let alone their empowerment.¹³ When African consecrated women put to writing their reflections and practical witness of the place and role of the consecrated in our time, there are usually specific unspoken and unwritten questions and assumptions that leave one with the doubt of whether the 'African religious woman understands and expresses her identity and upholds bolder consciousness as a woman from the African culture, called, consecrated, and sent on mission to evangelize and to incarnate the Gospel into their own socio-cultural reality'?'¹⁴

Vicente Carlos Kiaziku once noted that the religious life, which initially drew on Western models, is no longer sufficient to sustain an authentically Christian and African way of life.¹⁵ In his opinion, the inculturation methods are consistently dissatisfactory because there is very little integration of the African lived experiences in their ethnic and cultural characteristics, such as the traditional religion and cult of ancestors, language structure, social-ethical relations, a spiritual conception of the world and of life, and a humanism which enriches social-political and religious institutions, etc.¹⁶

¹³ See also Andrew Mbuvi, *African Biblical Studies: Unmasking Embedded Racism and Colonialism in Biblical Studies* (London: T&T Clark, 2023), 153.

¹⁴ Wirba, "The Prophetic Role of African Religious Women."

¹⁵ Vicente Carlos Kiaziku OFM Cap, *Consecrated Life in Bantu Africa* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2007), 17.

¹⁶ Kiaziku, *Consecrated Life in Bantu Africa*, 18.

This observation stems from the fact that Christian theology of consecrated life can be seen as conservative because its main inspiration is rooted in Scripture, Tradition, and the Code of Canon Law, leaving little space for other local traditions and contexts to shape theological discussions about consecrated life. It is also interesting that ideas about the origins of consecrated life come from Sacred Scripture, the early Church Fathers, and ancient desert monastic writings, and that their histories have so far been adapted and embedded into the African context.

But where the dialogue or matrices of engagement fails to make the Christian theologies and philosophies of consecrated life at home with the African people, scholars need to continue to articulate the importance of African philosophy and traditions for understanding the consecrated life and its theologies, not only from the now African culture and religious reality that emerges out of western Christian religio-cultural influence, but also from pre-Christian and non-Christian African values, beliefs, and culture that have influenced and enriched the African mind, its worldviews and traditions.

The stories of pre-colonial Nigerian women shaped African philosophical, socio-cultural, religious, and political worldviews, and they can be inspiring for consecrated women. Queens and heroines like *Moremi Ajasoro*, *Inikpi of Igala*, and Queen *Idia* rose as political leaders, spiritual figures, courageous women, patriots, and warriors who achieved what men could not. They played vital roles in nation-building, empowering women, shaping their eras, and influencing lives.¹⁷ Their stories can serve as inspiring prompts for a

¹⁷ Aje-Ori Agbese, *Preserving the Memories of Precolonial Nigeria Cultural Narratives of Precolonial Heroines*,” 89-99; Antoinette Tidjani Alou, “Niger and Sarraounia: One Hundred Years of Forgetting Female Leadership,”

meaningful, interactive discussion on the concepts of identity formation among consecrated women as Africans, social identification of these women as members of a society whose cultural, social, and religious institutions operate under patriarchal ideology of male dominance—an ideology that often leads to subjugation, commodification, objectification, and violence against women—and of an Afro-social model that involves indigenous wisdom and values which can effectively empower women, promote local participation in governance, and bring about liberation, development, and empowerment.

3. *Moremi Ajasoro, Inikpi of Igala, and Queen Idia: A Brief Biography*

In one of his interviews, the *Ooni of Ife, Oba Adeyeye Enitan Ogunwusi II*, remarked that “Without *Moremi*, the Yoruba would never have survived.”¹⁸ He goes on to emphasize that the story of *Moremi*, a powerful one from many centuries ago, remains very vivid in our memories. It relates to women and leadership. The story remains very relevant today and suggests that we should give women their pride of place.¹⁹ According to *Oba Adeyeye Enitan Ogunwusi*, *Moremi* was the “real mother of liberty,” whose actions and sacrifice

Research in African Literatures, Volume 40, Number 1 (Spring 2009), 42-56; Sylvia Serbin and Ravaomalala Rasoanaivo-Randriamamonjy, *African Women, Pan-Africanism and African Renaissance* (Africa Department. Paris, France: UNESCO Publishing, 2015), 25-26.

¹⁸ Punch, “Without *Moremi*, the Yoruba Would Have Never Survived – Ooni,” May 3, 2019. <https://punchng.com/without-moremi-the-yoruba-would-never-have-survived-ooni/>

¹⁹ Punch, “Without *Moremi*, the Yoruba Would Have Never Survived – Ooni.”

saved *Ile-Ife*.²⁰ Moremi is portrayed as a “heroine of the past with strong feminist undertones that challenged long-held beliefs on gender, gender roles, and issues like fertility and politics in contemporary Nigeria.”²¹

It is said that *Moremi Ajasoro* was born in the 12th century in *Offa*, in present-day Kwara state. She was a princess who became a queen in *Ile-Ife* by marrying *Oranmiyan*, the son of Yoruba founder *Oduduwa*. During her time, it happened that her people were continually raided by a tribe called the *Ugbo/Igbo* people. The *Ile-Ife* were furious about the raids, as they lacked the means to defend themselves. It was said that the invaders were seen as spirits (*Ará Òrùn*), appearing as masquerades completely covered in raffia palm fronds. These people were enslaving scores of *Ile-Ife* citizens, and because of this, they were generally regarded with disdain.

Following the incessant raids, *Moremi* sought spiritual assistance from the river goddess *Esinmirin*, and a pact was made between *Esinmirin* and *Moremi* that the latter would succeed. Still, on attaining victory, she must sacrifice her son *Oluorogbo*. *Moremi* agreed and proceeded with her plans. *Moremi* took the heroic step of offering herself to be captured by the raiders. She was then taken as a slave by the *Ugbo*. Due to her beauty and *Esinmirin*’s help, she married their ruler as his anointed queen. After familiarizing herself with the secrets of her new husband's army, she escaped to *Ile-Ife*.

²⁰ Gbenga Olarinloye, “Ooni of Ife celebrates *Moremi Ajasoro*,” November 11, 2016, www.vanguardngr.com/2016/11/ooni-ife-celebrates-moremi-ajasoro/

²¹ Aje-Ori Agbese, “Preserving the Memories of Precolonial Nigeria Cultural Narratives of Precolonial Heroines,” in *The Routledge Companion to Black Women's Cultural Histories*, Janell Hobson, ed., (New York, NY: Routledge, 2021), 87-99, 97.

She revealed the secrets to the *Yorubas*, who subsequently defeated the *Ugbo* in battle using the intelligence she provided.²²

Moremi's husband is depicted as controlling and patriarchal, viewing women as having little value. When Moremi shares her mission, he dismisses her as a "mere woman," reminds her that, as her husband, he owns her, and forbids her from going. She persists, and he then accuses her of infidelity, threatening to marry another wife if she proceeds. Upon her return, Oranmiyan welcomes her back and restores her as queen, even though he had married other women during her absence.²³

Like Queen Moremi, *Inikpi* of *Igala* was a beautiful and intelligent young woman who stood for her people, and whose selfless sacrifice saved her people from doom."²⁴ According to Ahmed Yerima, "Her bravery of self-sacrifice, loyalty, dedication, and love become the embodiment of *Inikpi* as a person, who has since been deified as a goddess."²⁵ And for ... "the contribution of *Inikpi* brevity and sacrifice is what keeps the *Igala* land in existence

²² Bolanle Bolawole, "Remembering Moremi Ajasoro," *Tribune Online*. 2021-09-26. <https://tribuneonlineeng.com/remembering-moremi-ajasoro/>; Gregory Austin Nwakunor, "Hope, betrayal and woman in 'Moremi The Musical'" *The Guardian Nigeria News - Nigeria and World News*. 2019-05-05. <https://guardian.ng/art/hope-betrayal-and-woman-in-moremi-the-musical/>; Oyeronke Olajubu, *Women in the Yoruba Religious Sphere* (McGill Studies in the History of Religions. Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press., 2003), 29.

²³ Agbese, "Preserving the Memories of Precolonial Nigeria Cultural Narratives of Precolonial Heroines," 92.

²⁴ Editor, "Inikpi, Self-Sacrificing *Igala* Princess," 28 July 2019. <https://guardian.ng/sunday-magazine/inikpi-self-sacrificing-Igala-princess/>

²⁵ Ahmed Yerima, "Princess *Inikpi* and Culture of Sacrificial Leadership for National Development,"
file:///F:/Heroines/Inikpi.pdf

till date.”²⁶ Although her exact birth date is unknown, sources suggest she lived in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.²⁷ Princess *Inikpi* was the only female among the five children of *Atah Ayegba Oma Idoko* and her mother, Queen *Omele*.

Legend has it that during a time of war between the *Binin* Kingdom and the *Igala* Kingdom, no house or market was safe. Even the streams—where women and children collected water or bathed—were poisoned, causing anyone who drank or used the water to die. As a result, the *Igala* people lived in constant fear. They consulted an oracle, and the high priest said that a human sacrifice was necessary to gain victory over their enemies. The *Attah* of *Igala*, *Ayegba Oma Idoko*, volunteered to sacrifice any slave. However, the gods rejected the slaves because the sacrifice required a virgin girl of royal blood, a young and promising girl.

The King of *Igala*, *Attah*, strongly opposed the oracle, but Princess *Inikpi* did not object or resist. Consequently, *Ayegba Oma Idoko* sacrificed his beloved daughter so that the *Igala* land could survive the invasion. On the appointed day, *Inikpi* voluntarily went to the banks of the River Niger, where she was to be buried alive, along with nine virgin slaves buried with her to accompany her in the afterlife (land of the spirit). After the sacrifice, as the *Binin* forces advanced, they saw the entire town in flames and decided to retreat, feeling there was no need to attack a place already burning. It was *Inikpi's* blood that deceived them. The sacrifice was costly, but it

²⁶ Yerima, “Princess *Inikpi* and Culture of Sacrificial Leadership for National Development”

²⁷ Agbese, “Preserving the Memories of Precolonial Nigeria Cultural Narratives of Precolonial Heroines,” 95.

brought peace to *Igala* land. The *Igala* people were finally able to live in peace again.²⁸

Queen *Idia* is renowned as a fierce warrior, wise leader, shrewd administrator, great counsellor, and a person possessed of spiritual powers, and was instrumental in helping her son, *Esigie*, become *Oba* after their father, *Oba Ozolua*, died. Queen *Idia* was the mother of *Esigie*, the *Oba* of Benin, who reigned from 1504 to 1550. He was the first *Oba* to speak a non-native language, Portuguese, around 1504 AD. The Portuguese arrived in *Benin* around 1485, making knowledge of their language crucial for negotiations with these new trading partners from the west.

Idia played a vital role in her son's rise and reign. She was a formidable warrior who fought tirelessly before and during *Esigie*'s rule. After *Oba Ozolua*'s death, a dispute arose between his two sons. *Esigie* controlled Benin City, while *Arhuanran* was based in Udo, about twenty miles away, both vying for the throne. *Idia* assembled an army supporting *Esigie*, which defeated *Arhuanran*, leading to *Esigie* becoming the 16th *Oba*.

This civil war weakened *Benin*'s regional power and diminished *Benin* City's political and cultural stature. Seizing the opportunity, neighbouring *Igala* warriors crossed the Benue River to challenge Benin's northern region. *Esigie* eventually defeated his brother and conquered the *Igala*, restoring the kingdom's unity and strength. Much of the credit for these victories was attributed to *Idia*'s political

²⁸ Agbese, "Preserving the Memories of Precolonial Nigeria Cultural Narratives of Precolonial Heroines," 95-96; Kogi State Hub, 11 September 2024. [https://web.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=1062681185857316&set=a.135027388622705&id=100063463332072&_rdc=1&_rdr#Ahmed Yerima, "Princess Inikpi and Culture of Sacrificial Leadership for National Development."](https://web.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=1062681185857316&set=a.135027388622705&id=100063463332072&_rdc=1&_rdr#Ahmed%20Yerima,%20Princess%20Inikpi%20and%20Culture%20of%20Sacrificial%20Leadership%20for%20National%20Development.)

advice, mystical powers, and medicinal knowledge, which were deemed essential to *Esigie*'s battlefield success.

Before *Oba Esigie*'s coronation, tradition dictated that the *Oba*'s mother must be killed to prevent her from wielding authority equal to the king's—she would be seen as a threat. *Esigie*, however, abolished this practice out of respect for her sacrifices and in deference to her influence. To honour her, *Esigie* established the position of *Iyoba*, or “Queen Mother,” granting her significant political privileges, including a separate residence with staff.²⁹

4. Lessons from Queen *Moremi Ajasoro*, Princess *Inikpi* of *Igala*, and Queen Mother *Idia* for Consecrated Women

The tales of *Moremi*, *Inikpi*, and *Idia* provide valuable examples of how precolonial African women demonstrated intelligence, resilience, courage, and self-sacrifice despite the domination of men or the impact of patriarchal experiences in exercising authority, particularly during times of war and crisis, and how they worked tirelessly in the service of religion, society, and politics. There are many examples of women who assumed positions of authority in politics, religion, and other communities' collective missions. In the words of Cyrelene Amoah-Boampong and Christabel Agyeiwaa, “women contested, negotiated, complemented, and transformed

²⁹ Sources are extracted from *National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Nigeria's post*. 6th February 2025. https://web.facebook.com/ncmmng/posts/queen-idea-was-the-mother-of-oba-esigie-the-16th-oba-king-of-the-benin-kingdom-a/1015631047278212/?_rdc=1&_rdt#; Nigeria Galleria. 2017. <https://www.nigeriagalleria.com/Nigeria/Personality-Profiles/Prominent-Nigerians/Queen-Idia.html>; Oludamola Adebawale, “The Untold Tale between Oba Esigie and Iyoba Idia of Benin,” *The Guardian Nigeria News - Nigeria and World News*. 2019-06-04. Retrieved 1-12-2025. <https://guardian.ng/life/the-untold-tale-between-oba-esigie-and-iyoba-idea-of-benin/>

their societies through their diverse roles in the political, social, religious, and economic realities of pre-colonial life in West Africa.”³⁰ Women were dignified and respected not so much for their beauty, but for their strength, creativity, autonomy, prowess, virtues, selflessness, and spirituality.

The presence of consecrated women in our society today is shaped by a complex interplay of social, economic, and political forces that precondition how they can behave in certain circumstances. To begin with, the consecrated woman is caught in a patriarchal world dominated by a social and religious system that exploits, discriminates against, and marginalizes women. Additionally, she faces constraints imposed by established, canonical, and hierarchical structures that limit her influence, roles, and participation in public decision-making, politics, and societal debates. These limitations also hinder her agency regarding personal choices about her life, including her sexual orientation, health, rights, privileges, and even her right to make personal decisions future.³¹

Religious women are rarely given top leadership positions in the Church or in organizations outside the Church. Any female religious

³⁰ Cyrelene Amoah-Boampong and Christabel Agyeiwaa, “Women in Pre-colonial Africa: West Africa,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of African Women's Studies*, Olajumoke Jacob-Haliso and Toyin Falola, eds., (Palgrave Macmillan. Springer Nature: Switzerland AG, 2021), (eBook, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-28099-4>), 1099-1111), 1099.

³¹ Rev. Prof. Patrick Mwanja, CSSp, A Life Uncommonly Blessed: Consecrated Life Today, Challenges and Trajectories,” A Paper presented to the Faculty of Theology at the Catholic University of Eastern Africa during the 18th Interdisciplinary Theological Session (March 2016): 1-14, 1 of 14. <https://repository.tangaza.ac.ke/server/api/core/bitstreams/394ce285-79d0-4926-97d4-b49ef0d7928b/content> (accessed 8 December, 2025).

who is fortunate enough to reach a high-ranking position, whether in the Church or society, is always celebrated as a trophy. Despite the Church's efforts to promote awareness and practical inclusion of women (and, by extension, female religious) in administrative and liturgical roles, including Vatican appointments, women still face challenges gaining acceptance, attention, significance, and recognition in a predominantly patriarchal society.

The existence of such gender contestation permeates stereotypes about women as incomplete and inferior human beings who need the dependency and direction of men to survive and succeed. This makes her lose faith in her sex, in her abilities, strength, and courage, while the male is brought up to be strong, proud of himself, and to view himself as superior to the female.³²

Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo laments that:

From childhood, the female is confronted with her insignificance and her subservient role in society. She internalizes these images that condemn her to a life of perpetual dependence and diffidence. Some of her sisters are confined in the home, or if they ever venture out of the door, they are compelled to cover themselves like masquerades – apparitions that frighten innocent children in broad daylight.

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Patriarchy has been institutionalized in our systems, and it generates, consciously and unconsciously, systemic inequalities in faith communities, families, and in public and private spaces. Unfortunately, the scandal of patriarchy continues to jeopardize the vision, mission, and experiences of many consecrated women in

³² Greer Germaine, *The Female Eunuch* (London, Paladin Publishers, 1970), 13, 158.

³³ Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, *Gender Issues in Nigeria: A Feminine Perspective* (Lagos: Vista, 1996), 74.

their struggle for social and economic independence, equality, justice, acceptance, collaboration in mission, in the mediation of power, identity crisis, in their engagement with the different hierarchical structures of the Church, and in their dialogue and interactions with society.

The invisibility of precolonial African women's history in our academic environment, written records, and transmitted traditions reflects their marginalization in African, global, and local histories. This creates a triple jeopardy that affects not only African women but also the women who are revered as religious persons. From our consideration, African women have been respected for their bravery, strong spiritual ties, resilience, entrepreneurial spirit, political engagement, and their role as authorities capable of deliberating on community affairs.

African traditional society boosted women's confidence, nurturing their courage, determination, freedom of expression, service, and sacrifice. For example, in the old *Oyo* empire in southwest Nigeria, women played a key role in installing kings. There was a more “flexible gender system and gender-bending, allowing for the interchanging of roles, statuses, and power by men and women.”³⁴ This gender flexibility, fostered by a culture of inclusiveness, was a creative frontier for women in their relationships with family, society, religion, and politics.³⁵

³⁴ Ifi Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society* (London: Zed Books, 1987), 132.

³⁵ Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*, 17-136. In the indigenous Nnobi society, Ifi Amadiume observes the flexibility in gender classification, which allowed the incorporation of specific categories of women into the male category, giving them positions of authority in the power structure. Daughters were, for example, regarded as males, as they could assume positions of power like males, and females were regarded as husbands, wherein a woman could pay money to acquire another woman.

Engaging the African worldview in its beliefs and values about women and allowing our gender stories to shape our religious culture and traditions involves reinterpreting, reconstructing, and possibly rewriting theological and biblical teachings on the identity and mission of the religious woman in relation to the social, political, religious, and cultural issues of the African context. The tremendous contributions of the African women and the African indigenous knowledge systems cannot be distorted, isolated, or expunged from religio-cultural and theological ideas about Christianity and its representation of religious cultures. The distancing of African religious experiences and cultural values from the mediation of divine revelation is a lack of sensitivity on the part of Christian theology to its human context.

Our African heroines were models of subversive courage and resilience, even when they could not read or write. They sought freedom even with their last breath. They understood justice, equality, and freedom. They brought changes that Western culture has tried to erase. They were courageous for the way they surmounted complex barriers in their societies with wisdom and resilience, and for the way they influenced their political, social, and religious life. There is no question that these women displayed remarkable courage and unwavering determination. Even when their authority or power was being undermined, they showed that the survival and future of the family and society depended heavily on them.

They were voices for the voiceless; they led protests for positive action and economic and cultural development (cf. the Aba Women's Riot of 1929); they inspired hope; and they demonstrated perseverance, resulting in victories. They epitomize remarkable bravery, self-sacrifice, and strategic insight in protecting their

people's future. The nature of *Inikpi*'s sacrifice, though, could be condemned in our time as barbaric and sadistic; it does, however, demonstrate her bravery, loyalty, dedication, and love for her people. Some studies have likened Princess *Inikpi* to Jesus Christ, who sacrificed himself to save humanity, and she, too, sacrificed her life for her people; just as Jesus did, she saved them. Similarly, her story resembles the biblical account of Jephthah, a judge who vowed to sacrifice whatever first greeted him upon his safe return after defeating the Ammonites. When he wins, his daughter, his only child, is the first to welcome him. Although he regrets his vow, she insists he must keep it and willingly offers herself. Like *Inikpi*, Jephthah's daughter dies a virgin and is revered in some Jewish sects today.³⁶

The contributions of Queen Mothers and daughters are truly ancient and essential to African culture, religion, and society. Africans have significantly benefited from their knowledge and services, from leading armies in war and ruling alongside their sons, the kings, serving as spiritually influential protectors of the kings and the kingdom, to holding important spiritual authority for their communities, which complements the King's administrative duties.³⁷

³⁶ Yerima, "Princess Inikpi and Culture of Sacrificial Leadership for National Development."

³⁷ Alice Boateng, "Examining the Roles of Modern Queen Mothers in Preserving the Cultural Heritage of the Akans of Ghana: Pedagogical Implications," in *African Traditional Oral Literature and Visual Cultures as Pedagogical Tools in Diverse Classroom Contexts*, Asimeng-Boahene Lewis and Baffoe Michael, eds., (Charlotte, NC: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2018), 137-150; Collins Adjei Mensah, et. al., "Female Traditional Leaders (Queen Mothers) and Community Planning and Development in Ghana," *Environmental Management and Sustainable Development* Vol. 3, No. 1 (2014), 205-220; "Nkuzi Nnam, "The Role of Women in Africa," ASA 2013 Annual Meeting Paper (2013), available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2236781>

In fact, queen mothers were held in the highest regard in the royal courts and among the people.

Like the precolonial African heroines, consecrated women have a mission of presence that permeates the fabric of their socio-cultural, religious, and political world. The practice of religious life as a life of simplicity, of submission and detachment, though it results in an improved relationship with God in faith, has often led to passivity toward responsibilities and a lack of commitment to communities' activities and to activities outside one's space. Our presence in society should be seen as a continued opportunity to inspire visions, wisdom, knowledge, service, and resilience that come with the roles we play, both within communities/society as daughters and mothers, and outside the communities as warriors, leaders, builders, spiritualists, and economists.

Examining the lives of *Moremi*, *Inikpi*, and *Idia*, we can gain inspiration to effect change in the areas of courage, sacrifice, and service, especially where patriarchy has posed challenges to their realization. Against the odds of patriarchy, the spirituality of courage, service, and sacrifice is needed for the struggle for liberation from all forms of oppression that affect religious life. While courage, sacrifice, and service are part of the Christian attitudes that are essential for living out one's faith, for serving God and humanity as brides of Christ, and for fulfilling our religious assignments and responsibilities, they are done in obedience and submission, not in resilience.

From the perspective of a religious woman, Christian courage prompts the consecrated to strive for and act in obedience to God's will despite fear or opposition. But the courage to follow Christ is not only manifested in obedience to God's will, but also in the courage to oppose and resist oppression, discrimination,

marginalization, and injustices of all forms, against human and social forces that make it impossible for religious women to be active interlocutors against racism, patriarchy, sexism, classism, and even colonialism.

We need revolutionary courage and intrepidity to be voices for women's liberation, to earn, organize, lead, decide, participate, and dream far beyond our domestic limitations. Of course, one could ask, when would there be revolutionary times when religious women would enter politics in both the church and the state? The impact of the absence or marginalization of women in politics and social spaces is the reason why Black-Eyed Peas once sang, "What's wrong with the world, mama? People livin' like they ain't got no mamas."³⁸

Circumscribing the religious life with religious formulations or teachings that emphasize the growth of an authentic *persona* rather than authentic presence, both directly and indirectly speak of patriarchal spirituality. Religious women, in various contexts and environments, are formed to value obedience, submission, humility, competence, and outward calmness. These attitudes shape the inner person in ways that link worthiness to meeting the religious expectations of one's inner being rather than responding to external realities that shape who we are, where we come from, and where we are going.

Conclusion

This paper explores the stories of precolonial African heroines like *Moremi Ajasoro*, *Inikpi* of *Igala*, and Queen Mother *Iyoba Idia*, highlighting their agency and leadership. It critiques the patriarchal interpretations of Christian theology that limit women's roles and

³⁸ Black Eyed Peas, Extract from "Where is the Love".

advocates for incorporating these heroines' stories into African Christian theology. By doing so, the study aims to empower consecrated women and reshape church structures to be more inclusive and relevant. The stories of pre-colonial Nigerian women like *Moremi Ajasoro*, *Inikpi* of *Igala*, and Queen Mother *Iyoba Idia*, who defied gender norms and contributed to their societies, offer inspiration for consecrated women to assert their identities and challenge patriarchal structures. Consecrated women today face systemic inequalities and limited leadership opportunities within the Church and society. To address this, it is crucial to reinterpret religious teachings, acknowledging the significant role of African women and indigenous knowledge systems in shaping Christianity and fostering a more inclusive and equitable society.