politics of their home towns alone, women exercised influence in the politics of both their home towns and the towns of their marriage.

Of special importance was the control women exercised over local trade. In the Igbo world view, a marketplace was not simply a place to buy and sell goods; it was also a ritual, political, and social center. The power women exercised over the organization of local trade derived from the fact that most local traders were women. They alone could best serve the needs of those who converged in the marketplace for commercial and other purposes. Caravans of long-distance traders made their way to local markets, often accompanied by a large number of noncommercial specialists, such as the agents of important oracles, smiths, carvers, priests, diviners, and doctors. Although most long-distance traders were men, their prosperity depended upon the careful regulation of local markets. Igbo women's associations upheld gender balance and equality. Their political and social activities were very useful, though men occasionally felt they were contentious.

Secret Societies
Some secret societies were exclusively for men, some for women, and others for both sexes. Very little is known about the secret societies because the men and women who joined them took their oath of secrecy very seriously. Besides, the Igbo were averse to divulging information that might hinder the effectiveness of their secret societies; many of them functioned as the mouthpieces of ancestors, oracles, and spirits. In important judicial matters, masked ancestors (the egwugwu, or egungun) might appear and pronounce a verdict. In Chapter Ten of Things Fall Apart, for example, we see the egwugwu emerge to hear a series of legal cases. When that happened, no one contested their judgment, because no one could pretend to be wiser than the ancestors or the spirits. And no one ever disclosed the identity of the individual behind the mask, even if he happened to recognize the voice or the walk of a particular elder.

Igbo Marriage Customs
Marriage also served to bring households, lineages, and even towns together. The Igbo regarded it as the cornerstone of their whole social structure. Discussions leading to marriage were taken seriously, and they involved not just the immediate families of the bride and groom.
Europeans raged throughout that same region, conflicts that form the backdrop of Achebe’s classic novel.

CMS missionaries were soon joined in the Onitsha and Asaba areas by two different Roman Catholic societies, the Holy Ghost Fathers and the priests of the Société des Missions Africaines (SMA). The Holy Ghost Fathers worked in Igboland east of the Niger River, while the SMA worked on the area west of the river. The CMS worked on both sides of the river. The three most memorable missionaries of that period were Reverend Samuel Ajayi Crowther of the CMS, Father Joseph Shanahan of the Holy Ghost Fathers, and Father Carlo Zappa of the SMA. It is interesting to note that many of the most effective CMS missionaries were in fact Africans. Rev. John Christopher Taylor was an Igbo man, born in Sierra Leone to freed slave parents. Rev. Crowther, later appointed bishop, was a former Yoruba slave. The Roman Catholics, on the other hand, relied entirely on European priests for their missionary work.

The Igbo had adopted a conciliatory stance in their early dealings with the missionaries, because the Igbo religion was pacific and the Igbo themselves respected the religious views of other people. The Igbo usually listened patiently to the Christians and then expected the missionaries to pay equal attention to their own viewpoints. Some Igbo saw the missionaries as essentially harmless, and shrugged at the uncomprehending priests who fraternized with outcasts and gaily occupied themselves with preaching.

Yet, if necessary, missionaries were prepared to destroy the entire system of Igbo customs and beliefs in order to convert the people to Christianity. Bishop Crowther himself saw Igbo society as evil, his ministry as a battle between light and darkness. Father Zappa criticized the ‘foolishness’ of following the religion of their forefathers. Father Shanahan described his mission as a battle against a ‘baffling brick wall of failure’. Most missionaries painted ghastly pictures of Igbo society, which they sent back to Europe, and incited European governments and traders against the Igbo.

Missionaries expected British colonial agents to protect them, and, ignoring possible provocation, the British raided many Igbo towns on the grounds that they had harassed the missionaries. Some foreign missionaries actually provided strategic information about the villages