

CHANGING PATTERNS IN THE ROLES OF *UMUADA* IN IGBO SOCIAL FORMATIONS

Ifeyinwa EMEJULU¹ and Mmesoma UMEAGUDOSI²

^{1&2}Department of History and International Studies,
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, NIGERIA

Abstract

Feminism emanated as a response to the need of finding avenues of helping women all over the world to circumvent the numerous constraints preventing them from contributing maximally to the community and achieving their utmost potentials. It was believed that men were valued more than women and hence enjoyed more opportunities and privileges in the different societies all over the world. While it is so obvious that there are many constraints preventing women from achieving their goals, women are celebrated in Igbo society. The Umuada group which consist of the biological female offspring of a particular kindred plays distinct and powerful roles in their different communities in Igbo land. This group has highlighted the relevance of women in Igbo society. The roles they play include conflict resolution, transmission of culture and serving as agents of social control. In the contemporary society their relevance and contributions have been sustained and even diversified. This study seeks to debunk the belief that women are inferior and are inadequately appreciated in the society by highlighting the unique and incredible roles played by the Umuada group in the traditional and contemporary times. It uses the qualitative approach in evaluating the information derived from primary and secondary sources and does not align itself to any theoretical construct. The study highlights the fact that contrary to wide held belief, women are valued and appreciated in Igbo society.

Keywords: Appreciation, Culture, Relevance, Roles, Transmission.

Introduction

The different waves of feminism originated as defiance to the belief that the world was basically divided into two- the world of men and the world of women. While men were believed to enjoy a lot of privileges and were free to pursue their careers, women were left to the domestic realm. Women through feminism started demanding equal opportunities and enabling environment to pursue their career while still doing their domestic duties. In the pursuit of their objectives as Emejulu (2009) cautions, women are enjoined to clamour

for equity as against equality for this concept of equality is a misnomer. However, while it is important to demand for better environment and enabling policies to work with, it is important to appreciate differences inherent in different groups for as Igbo (2012) observes as human beings belonging to different groups, our differences mainly help us in achieving set goals and can never be threat to our unity. It is also salient to highlight the fact that even with the constraints encountered by women in different times, each society celebrates its women. Women should not lose sight of this in their quest for fair treatment from the society. The appreciation of the women by the society is an integral part of the people's life.

This study focuses on the contributions of *Umuada* a collection of females born in a particular kindred in Igbo society. This group provides an avenue through which Igbo people celebrate their women. The Umuada group is a pressure-group which play immeasurable role in the community. They are so powerful that at times they can enforce decisions that nullify those previously taken by the menfolk. The group has retained their relevance with the changing times.

Conceptual Clarification of Umuada

Nwada, or simply *ada*, is a female biological offspring in a nuclear family, while Umuada the plural form is a collective of all biological female off springs of a particular kindred or clan. These women who form the Umuada could either be married in their natal town or outside in other towns. Okodo refers to Umuada as a "Union of sisters of one particular kindred who are married out of the kindred". This group he explains is often led by the oldest member.

The Umuada group is known by different names in different Igbo dialects. Ojiakor (2005) asserts that other names for Umuada include *Umuokpu* or *Umuoku alu alu* and refer to a union of daughters born in a particular community or town and married within or outside their place of origin. Membership, she enunciates, is by birth and is compulsory for the daughters of a clan or kindred. It is salient to highlight the fact that even though membership is by birth and compulsory, it is important that a *Nwada* identifies and associates with others before she is accepted into the group.

Onyeonu (2018) in examining the place of this female group in Mbaitolu in Imo State elucidates that this group is referred to as Umumboto institution. She asserts that,

Mgboto is a broad name for every female offspring or daughter in Owerri zone (Mbaitolu inclusive). *Umugboto* is its pluralized form, though in Igboland generally, they are known as *Umuada* and Umugboto signifies a group of *Ada* (daughters). The Umugboto traditional institution is an association of mature daughters of the different families/kindreds/villages who are either married within or outside their fatherland. (Pg.72).

The different names notwithstanding, Umuada is a highly respected group in the different parts of Igbo land. They play diverse roles, but they are mainly known for their advocacy in thorny cases whose settlement at times elude the men folk.

The Role of Umuada in the Traditional and Pre-Colonial Igbo Society

In the traditional Igbo society, *Umuada* played prominent and diverse roles. Their presence was felt when there was celebration, festival and burial ceremonies in their immediate family. They strive to ensure there is peace and that their brothers' wives behave according to norm. They also ensure that their brothers are not found wanting in taking care of their wives. These wives on their own part were always cautious not to offend the *Umuada*.

Whenever there was a death in the family, they played vital role during the funeral ceremony. They sleep in the deceased compound for a number of days and the family tries their best to take care of them. In describing the role of Umuada during burial ceremonies, Okodo explains that

They are so vital that if they did not end their function very well, the funeral is said not to have taken place. It is when they divide food stuff and ingredients given to them that the soul of the dead member of their kindred is said to rest in peace. The Igbo man will then say that the dead man has reached the land of the spirits (pg. 43)

In the pre-colonial period in some communities, it was the duty of the *Umuada* to wash the corpse of a man before burial. They also ensured that the wife of the deceased behaved according to tradition. There have been instances where the women in this group have been accused of maltreating their fellow women in this period of bereavement. They accused their brothers' wives of killing their husbands and engaging in obnoxious custom of forcing them to drink the water used in bathing the corpse to establish their innocence. It was also their duty to shave the hair of the widow to commence her mourning period. While performing their traditional roles, these daughters of the land instilled fear into people especially their brothers' wives.

During wine carrying ceremonies, they escort their brother to bring home their new bride and ensured that the necessary activities are carried out. They do not play any role in the collection of the dowries and are not present when the dowry is paid or demanded. However, they must be present during the ceremony of wine carrying to collect their own share of items. Isichei (1977:74) in reviewing the traditional role of *Umuada*, says they were a pressure group that reacted to any misdeed that occurred in the village. They also "disciplined offending women" through seizure of property and through ostracizing. They also supported the "wise" decision of the menfolk and acted as peace envoys during wars. The support of the Umuada she summarises was very effective. Nnoli (1999:59) in

evaluating their role avers that they complimented the roles of the age grades and even the revered masquerade group. They also meted out requisite punishments to offenders. He points out the at times *Umuada* can make decision that might nullify those earlier made by the men.

In the pre-colonial period, in the event of the death of *Nwada*, her corpse was taken back to her natal home for internment. Presently, this is no longer the case. A live cow is now presented to her family, in the event of her death. In appreciation of the numerous duties performed by the Umuada, they are given exclusive entitlement to the waist of any animal-goat, sheep, cow and birds killed in the community. This practice has survived till present. The most intriguing thing about this entitlement is that no matter the quantity of meat on the waist of that animal, the sharing is always amicably done and there is absence of quarrels regarding the sharing. The sharing is done, not necessarily for the meat, but for the sense of belonging accruable from the act. The associations activities were directed by carefully chosen officers who according to Ojiakor (2005) included *Onyeisi Ada* (Leader), *Ndisote* (Deputies), *Ojide Ego* (Treasurer) *Oda-nha* (Provost) and *Oje-ozu* (Sender of message).

It is important to note that even though in the pre-literate society, as expected, the laws guiding the Umuada (were not written down as a constitution) every *Nwada* knew the rules guiding the association and community in general and was expected to abide by them. This revered group adjudicated in serious cases like manslaughter, pre-marital pregnancy, adultery, poisoning etc. Their verdicts which were always passed without fear or favour, were seen as sacrosanct and was accepted by the community. This impartiality in the adjudication of cases is where their strength and legitimacy derive from. Where an indicted party fails to respect or accept their decision, stiff punishments which include desecration of the offenders' compounds, banishments and ostracizing are meted out.

Umuada in the Contemporary Times

Umuada as has been mentioned consist of all the biological female children of a particular kindred. Even though birth in particular kindred confers automatic membership to members, it is very important to associate with others for one to enjoy the full benefits of the association. Meetings are held at stipulated times and important issues pertaining to members' welfare as well as others are discussed. These meetings are held not just in the villages but in towns where members reside. Umuada meetings are even held in distant continents where members reside, hence one hears of Umuada Umuchu London Branch, or Umuada Achina U.S.A Branch.

In these meetings, discussions on projects to be embarked on are held to enlighten members on prevailing issues. Health talks are given to members. According to the President of Umuada Amihie Umuchu, there are always good attendances to Umuchu Umuada meetings as members anticipate exciting activities that take place during these

Umuchu meetings. These meetings serve as bond holding members together and as deterrent for members who may indulge in unacceptable behaviour as no member ever looks forward to being discussed in a meeting. They also share moments of conviviality and catching on, on happenings in each other's lives. Most importantly they are always reminded their duties as *Umuada* in all spheres of live – in the family, church, community and work place and the importance of avoiding scandals. (Personal Communication)

The spirit and legitimacy of the *Umuada* group has been sustained in Igbo society. Nnoli in lending credence to this, explains that even with the introduction of Christianity the *Umuada* have remained “undivided in their action against social evils and restoration of sanity in the community”. However, the roles of *Umuada*, paradoxically have been both diminished and enhanced by Christianity and education. However, even though they are still very relevant both in their natal and marital abodes, a lot of changes has been introduced.

The twin events of Christianity and education have opened Vistas for the girl child in Africa. They have impacted in the choice of moral, societal and even cultural values. Christianity emphasizes the need of loving one's neighbour as herself. This has helped the ladies in *Umuada* group to be more charitable towards each other and this has helped in strengthening the bond of love between them, as well as other members of the society. Acquisition of education has equally empowered them mentally and psychologically, thus making them realize they can achieve more when they are united. So, Christianity and education have led to the eradication of some obnoxious culture and prepared them to contribute more meaningfully to the society. Love forms the foundation on which their activities are carried out. Again a good relationship with God enables them to have good values in life and also have good character. With these values they are reliable and accessible.

With the acquisition of education, *Umuada* presently pursue careers that enable them contribute maximally to both their families and society. With education they have better jobs that enable them make decent living. With this they are not a burden to their families, they become independent. This is very important as they are free to express their views when issues come up. When the *Nwada* depends on people for sustenance, she finds herself compromised.

Nwada's Role in Her Natal Family

Having equipped herself with good personal character traits, she has prepared herself adequately to play the expected roles in her family. In the first place, she takes pride in her membership of her family, because she knows that is where she originated from. She ensures that there is peace in her natal home. She deals with disagreements promptly so they do not fester to become complicated cases. She makes herself available and so is always conversant with issues in her family. This is no longer an era where girls were

shielded from events that occur in the family. Their contributions and suggestions are often helpful because two heads are always better than one.

Chinedu Okoye reiterates that women are good business managers and should be encouraged to participate in family businesses. He narrates that in their family, even though they are four sons and three daughters, there was no quarrel among the siblings when their father died without writing a will. He explained that their father brought in the first daughter of the family (who also happened to be the first child of the family) into the family business. Since her entrance into the business, her contributions have led to the growth and expansion of the business and she has also ensured that there is no rancour among the siblings till date (Personal Communication 20/2/2020).

In another incident, Mrs. Uzoka of Umuchu explained that the daughters of a family realize the importance of telling the truth at all times as this is *Cine qua non* for peace and justice to reign in a family. They are expected to tell the truth, not minding whose ox is gored. She gave an example of what happened in a meeting which was summoned by the father to complain about an ill treatment by his brother in their joint business. She calmly listened as both her father and the brother presented their sides of the story. After careful deliberations, she looked straight at the father and told him, he was the defaulter and the brother had not done any wrong. She gave her judgment not minding he was her father! She then advised the father not to do anything that will sour the relationship in the family. This is exactly how a quintessential *nwada* behaves. (Personal Communication 5/1/2020). A good *Nwada* realizes that there is a role for everybody in the family-there is a role for the *Ada* (the daughter) and a role for the *Okpara* (the son). She does not usurp the role of the *okpara*. Where she plays her role well, the *okpara* always consults her on issues and seeks her advice too.

The good *Nwada* is the driving force in her family. She ensures that their parents are taken care of. The welfare of her parents rests with her and where she has good relationship with them, the brothers' wives also help out. Presently the good *Nwada* has realized the it is better to be allies with her brother's wives, for there will be more people to work with, with the resultant peace. Enlightenment resulting from education and Christianity enable her strive to maintain inter personal relationships with all. Jealousy and envy is eliminated because, all parties share occasions of joy and sorrow. Time of celebrations provide apt opportunities for exchange of gifts. She also ensures that her siblings are all responsible and when there is need to reprimand anybody for bad behaviour, she does it with love.

The Role of Umuada in the Contemporary Society

With a fortified family background, the *Nwada* now moves out to the society to also make meaningful contributions. In her own kindred, she associates under an umbrella group with other *Umuada* and seeks way of making her impact felt. She provides for the needs of the people around her and also offers her advice. During festivities, she presents gifts

and other items for entertainment. Mrs. Edith Okoye from Achina town says that the people in the village always anticipate their December meetings because their sisters (*Umuada*) from the cities lavish gifts on them. These gifts include wrappers and other items. These sisters from the cities contribute to projects in the village for example building of halls, provision of pipe borne water and seats in the halls. (Personal Communication 20/2/2019)

With education and subsequent careers, they occupy influential positions and are thus in positions to help their kith and kin in the village. During appointments and admissions, they are most useful in securing these for them. An Igbo female Associate Professor in a tertiary institution, asserts that her position in the University has enabled her bring in a lot of youths from her town Aguluezechukwu to acquire tertiary education. At times she does not only secure these admissions but also pays school fees for some of them. These Umuada also serve as role models for the young ladies among them. They contribute in policy making to eradicate unfavourable policies against women and entrench enabling ones for their growth. Some of them participate in partisan politics and vie for elective offices.

Umuada of Igbo extraction have remained custodians of culture and heritage. They are taught from childhood to know they are expected to behave according to the norms and tradition of their society. They grow with these values and in time they also impart them on their own children. They are expected to influence people around them positively and pay attention to their manner of dressing and general behaviour. Mrs. Okeke from Umuomaku narrates that during a burial ceremony of a particular woman in the town, the married women of the kindred were called out to dance as is the custom. During the dance, the Umuada who were also present, observed that some of the dancing women were skimpily dressed and danced in a manner that was not deserving of a married woman. Some of these women danced so carelessly that their under wears were seen. There and then, the Umuada decreed that henceforth all married women coming for burial must attend in double wrappers for which Igbo women are known. (Personal Communication 2/12/2020).

The need to preserve Igbo culture has become important in the present globalized world, where it is easy for people to adopt foreign ideologies. These alien ideologies include same sex marriages and single parenthood. Umuada Igbo even while living in foreign countries form Umuada Associations through which they project Igbo Culture and at the same time call erring members who may start behaving differently and out of norm back to order. Mrs. Ogonna Chinedu explains that even though this is a litigation and human rights age, members of her Umuada group residing in America hold their meetings regularly to remind themselves that they are Africans who are expected to behave in an acceptable tradition. They are also reminded that certain activities are regarded as taboos and that marriage for the African remains a union between a man and woman, and just as

Emejulu argues, lesbianism remains a deviant behaviour in Africa. The need for this transmission of core African values and culture can never be over-emphasized.

In Umuchu, Umuada being married outside the town have continued to impact positively on the town. In Ozara Akukwa, one of the villages in the town, an *Umuchu Nwada* being married in Delta State, provided Solar Street Light from the Technical School to the Igwe's palace. This singular act has made the villagers to be so proud of her and they can hardly conceal their joy when they narrate the story of their daughter's charitable act. (Personal Communication 5/4/2020).

Emejulu (2003) also, narrates how the Umuada of Ekwulobia waded into a misunderstanding between the police and Motor park workers in their town. This issue had been outstanding and was difficult to manage, till the Umuada group waded into the issue and it was resolved. Odumegwu (2015), while highlighting the values of women asserts that a woman "usually adapts herself to change situations and finds it graceful to do so". The Igbo woman has continued to contribute immensely through this quintessential group. With each new period and new circumstances, they have continued to make themselves relevant in the society. Igbo women through hard work are found in different spheres through dint of hard works and core values adopted as revered and groomed daughters of Igbo land.

Conclusion

It is important to note that Umuada Igbo have continued to be relevant in the society. The Society appreciated their immense contribution in the past and has continued doing so. Judging from the unique position occupied by Umuada and how powerful they have become, one is often tempted to revisit the marginalization of women in Igbo land. The women through the Umuada are celebrated by both the Society and men. They were so strong that they can rescind a decision taken by the men. While appreciating the immense contributions of Igbo women through their *Umuada* Group, it is important to note that there is still need for greater empowerment of these women in the areas of economy, provision of adequate facilities, for them to contribute maximally while dismantling societal constraints that impede their growth, provision of adequate maternal and child health care and enabling electoral activities that will enable them contribute more to the society.

References

- Emejulu, H. (2009) "Women's Desire for 'Emancipation' Quest for Equality or Equity" in *NATTI Journal of Readings*. Awka
- Emejulu, H. (2003) "The Contributions of Women to Tourism and Enugu State", A Ph.D Dissertation Submitted to the Department of Archaeology, University of Nigeria, Nsukka.
- Igbo, P. (2012). *The Treasure of Difference* Enugu: SAN Press Ltd. 2012
- Isichei, E. (1977) *Igbo World* London: Macmillan

- Muonwe, M. (2015) *Challenging the Myths of Gender Equality* USA 2015
- Nnoli, L. (1999) *The Culture – History of Umuchu*. Enugu: Nolix Publications
- Odumegwu, I. (2015) “The Igbo Woman in the Dialogics of Intergrative Personhood” in *Gender Discourse in African Theatre, Literature and Visual Arts*. Kraft Books Ltd.
- Ojiakor, N. (2015) “Igbo Women and Politics in Nigeria”. Unpublished Ph.D Dissertation Submitted to the Department of History. University of Nigeria, Nsukka
- Okodo, I. (2006) “The Igbo Traditional Polity as the Bedrock of Nigerian Democracy”, in Umeasiegbu, R.N (ed) *Arts & Humanities Quarterly, Vol. 1, No.1 2006*
- Onyeamu, L. (2018) *The Nigeria Civil War and Mbaitolu Women, 1967-1980*. A Ph.D Dissertation submitted to the Department of History and International Studies, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka.

Interviews

- Mrs. Ify Okeke – Umunze – 18 May 2016
- Mrs. Ogonna Chinedu – Awka Etiti – 27 Dec. 2018
- Mrs. Edith Okoye – Achina – 20 Dec. 2019
- Mr. Chinedu Okoye – Awka Etiti – 20 Feb. 2020
- Mrs. Ngozi Uzoka – Umuchu – 5 Jan. 2020

Biographical Note

Ifeyinwa EMEJULU, *Ph.D.*, is a Professor of History and a former Head, Department of History and International Studies, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, NIGERIA. Email: drifyemejulu@yahoo.com

Mmesoma UMEAGUDOSI is of the Department of History and International Studies, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, NIGERIA. Email: somadosi89@gmail.com