

UMUADA GUILD AS AN INSTRUMENT OF SOCIO-POLITICAL ORGANISATION IN IGBO SOCIETY: THE URUALLA EXPERIENCE

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Abstract.

Women in traditional Igbo society are a force in political, legal and social issues. This is true of the Umuada Igbo who in the past and till date have remained a social institution of the Igbo society. They have also rendered invaluable services to the Igbo socio-political organization though the trend today is fast changing. This study was set to investigate the changing nature of the roles played by Umuada guild. To achieve this, a survey method was used and the researcher randomly selected and interviewed 50 women from Urualla ranging from 60 years and above and 59 years down to 20years. Cameras and tape recorders were used to collect the information needed and a review of related literature was also done. In the end, the researcher collected, analyzed and interpreted all the necessary information obtained. Findings reveal that women as Umuada constituted a control system on the exercise of power within these levels, the kindred, the village and the entire Urualla community. For instance, they could, by symbolic protest of leaving the village or sitting on the floor, signal that something wrong has been done and should be corrected. The researcher concluded by saying that the development of Urualla community politically, religiously, economically and socially in the present dispensation will depend much on how the Umuada work in harmony with other town unions and other arms of the community. It also suggests that there is still need for the empowerment and upliftment of Umuada in Urualla political organization.

Introduction

Long before the colonists arrived Africa, and even during and after colonialism, women have been a powerful part of the Igbo society. They are a force in political, legal and social issues. They have much more powers than was generally recognized by early authors. According to Arinze (1970), in Udeze, (2013):

Women can hold their powers not only by means of public demonstrations, group strikes, suicides, ridicule and refusal to cook for their husbands but also by their inherent vitality, courage, self reliance and a common organizational ability by which they present and protect their interests as the Umuada Guild.(p.4)

The word Umuada, which is a fraternity of daughters is a compound / collective noun formed from “umu” and “ada”. Ada means “daughter” and in some cases the first female child whereas “umu” as a generic plural prefix conveys the sense of many. Most naturally every Igbo woman or girl is “ada” though the word is generally used most often to refer to the daughter of a family. Ogbalu (n.d.) acknowledged that, “Ada is the name of every first born female of a woman. The institution is immemorial and prevails almost everywhere. Umuada as the members are called are women born in a particular town, married or unmarried”. (p.28). Continuing, he also affirmed that: “...those of them who have performed what maybe called a title are called Umuokpu”. In the

words of Isichei (1977), in Mbata (2009), “Umuada is the group also known as Umuokpu. They are made up of women born in the town and married within or outside, but in a less distant neighbouring town”. (p.74)

In Urualla community, Umuada means native daughters, the daughters of a common ancestor or daughters of the soil. It is a collection of all daughters of Urualla clan, kindred, village or town, whether old, young, single, married, separated or divorced. In a poetic form, Maduekwe (1979) beautifully described Umuada as “both married and unmarried daughters who have chairs in both their homes and their husband’s homes. They occupy positions and serve as both daughters of the soil in their ancestral land and wives in their husband’s places”. (p.12) He went further to illustrate their roles in their paternal homes both in times of joy and sorrows as well as their roles in their husbands places with their interests being uppermost in the hearts of their relatives for their care and protection. Agugu (2006) and Ajaeree (2003) both explained the concept of Umuada as married daughters of the soil. They also talked about how beautiful and well respected umuada are in their villages. There is nothing secret in Umuada and the union is open to all daughters from Urualla married or unmarried. It is also the right of every daughter of Urualla without exception to belong to Otu Umuada, (the society of daughters).

The Umuada constitute a very influential, social and political force. Ofomata (2002) acknowledged that, “Umuada Igbo represent a gender platform for cultural revival, rural development, integrated health care, advocacy, women empowerment and farming to feed their parents, brothers, relatives and children of their locality”. (pp.226-228). Umuada Urualla are a powerful socio-political set up as well as a functional forum for all Urualla daughters. Igbo women according to Ene (2007), “...have historically asserted themselves into Igbo life and culture with exciting gendered roles and identities for meaningful development to appreciate feminism in a world building of masculinism”.(p.5). In this sense, women in African Culture are subjugated to the lives of men. This is why Mbata (2009) reported that, “African Culture in general and the Nigerian Culture in particular are male dominated; hence the use of the Cliché, “It’s a man’s world in Africa”. (p.4). Concluding, Mbata (2009), still maintained that, “...the man sets the pace to be followed by the woman as far as culture is concerned”. (p.4). This niche was one of the reasons that aggravated the need for the women to bring themselves together and seek for solutions to their various needs. Umuada is therefore one of such forums where these women collectively get together to appreciate themselves and their culture as well as have solidarity for one another’s needs and aspirations. They play important roles in the social and judicial aspects of Igbo life. Generally, they are guided by the demands of social justice through arbitration and reconciliation which is the “paramount Igbo judicial principle”. (Ilogu, 1974, p.28). They always aim at restoring kinship relationship and the extended family solidarity.

Origin of Umuada.

These are daughters of the community married within or outside the community. They play important roles in the social and judicial aspects of the Igbo life. Generally, they are guided by the demands of social justice through arbitration and reconciliation which is the paramount Igbo judicial principle. They always aim at restoring kingship relationship and extended family solidarity. Ilogu, (1974:28). The Umuada guild emanated from the coming together of the married daughters of Urualla from their husbands homes to their birth places/homes to form a common front. When they got married, they thought it wise to look for an avenue whereby they will from time to time gather themselves for one need or the other and even for the sake of seeing and being with themselves as sisters to appreciate one another. Due to this, they formed the union in the olden days as a rallying point for meeting themselves for their common good and for the good of their

community. Since then the Umuada guild has remained till today. It is the inalienable right of every daughter of Urualla without exception to belong to Otu Umuada. As a group, Otu Umuada is a powerful socio-political setup in Igbo culture and a functional forum for females.

Formation and Recognition of Umuada.

This will be discussed in two phases:

Qualification for Membership: The membership of Umuada is the absolute right of every daughter/woman born in Urualla. Even if and when she marries outside the village or town, she remains 'ada' of her father's community. Ene (2007) supported this view and argued that, "...the membership of Umuada is conferred patrilineally; that is from the father's side of the family" (p.5). He went further to report that "...any woman who does not belong to the group is either an outsider or has been ostracized by her community for some abominable acts" (p.5). This shows that any married daughter/woman of Urualla town, no matter her age is automatically qualified to be a member of Umuada in her family, kindred or village level. She cannot belong to the Umuada group in her husband's place neither can she command the kind of respect/regard she has in her birth place where she is married. Agugu, (2006) reiterated this fact and contended that "... the Umuada's are highly regarded and respected in their birth places than in the places where they are married". In Urualla, where they are married, they are referred to as *alutaradi*". Ofoegbu (1982) also acknowledged the recognition of the Umuada (fraternity of daughters) and "frowns upon any pattern of authority which is not open to inquiry, to the free flow of information, and to individual rights of seeking knowledge and redress". (p.216)

Umuada Urualla are divided into categories. The town union group is the one that binds all Urualla married daughters/women no matter where they are married. The group concerns every married Ada Urualla both at home and abroad. At this level, they are divided into age grades of grades 1-10 such that every member's presence is felt and recognized in her group.

The next group is the village group which is a little bit smaller than the town group. Here also the age grade system is applied due to the large number of the women involved so that nobody is left out in all that they do.

Finally, there is the third group that is made up of the kindred and the family members depending on how large their numbers are. This is because some families are small while some are large. In cases where they are small, the Umuada only operate at the kindred level and where they are large, they form nuclear groups within their various families so as to take care of their needs at that level.

b) Formalization of membership:

In spite of the fact that one's status as a bonafide daughter of Urualla and most especially as a married woman qualifies one to be a member of the Umuada, one still has to formalize one's membership by registering officially. Every new member is expected to register by presenting some food items, drinks and in some cases money. The registration of every Nwada is done at all the levels (town, village and kindred), to enable the person franchise her rights in all umuada activities. Most times, their bi-monthly meetings especially at the town level are attended on representations from members selected from different villages and kindreds. For their annual gathering which is mostly once every year and on an agreed date/month, it is compulsory that every member should attend. Usually on that day, they are dressed in their uniforms and are seated in different canopies according to their age grades for easy identification and recognition.

In the past, Umuada had two groups (Christians and pagans). The pagan group was called "Ndi otu Nna". This group being the older and more dedicated members never agreed to most of the innovations brought in by Christianity. Then, they were the stronger group that never allowed

anything to come in between them and their belief. Today, they have all grown old and some of them are dead giving way and opportunity to the Christian group to take over. Umuada Urualla usually have their official meetings five times in a year with the sixth one as the annual get-together though they often convene meetings as the need arises. They choose their leaders mostly from the older members of the group who are very truthful, faithful and possess strong and good leadership qualities. The ones chosen are considered to have known more about the activities of the group and what is expected of them for their progress.

Functions of Umuada:

Umuada Urualla is historically known for their dignity, principles, strength, bravery, determination, courage and hard work for the up keep and growth of their town. They are unique and are highly distinguished in Mbanasaa clan in the Ideato North local government area of Imo State. They are also fearless, freedom fighters and cannot stand any injustice no matter the

situation. They create a forum for interaction amongst themselves and usually have a rallying point where matters affecting them are discussed and executed. In the olden days, there were no written records of their activities but they always remembered and acted accordingly on whatever decisions they agreed on. In the present dispensation, a good number of them are educated and they now have their activities recorded. They have bye laws that guide them in almost all their activities to avoid neglect and mistakes as the case may be. Ene (2007) has observed that, "Umuada is therefore a register of collective feminism through which Umunne and Umunna can symbolically form a binary human centered culturally and solidarity".(p.5). Njaka (1994) in provides a convincing description of the powers of Umuada in the following passage:

The Umuada do intrude in the affairs of the state and can impose sanctions which may include heavy fines, sit-ins, and other measures. Certainly the elders will go to great lengths to avoid a confrontation with the Umuada and this way the women do, indirectly exert a strong influence on the state of affairs. (p.123).

Several historical examples demonstrate the functions of Umuada. The Umuada were responsible for the Igbo women rebellion of 1929 and 1930 and the women's riot of 1957, which were widely recorded by Igbo historians. Abamonye, (1998, pp.109-132), in Okoro, (2012). In recent years Umuada has influenced the Igbo local politics by playing a strict role of what Njaka describes as "custodians of the constitutions". (p.123). They settle disputes between members and others especially their relations and in such matters, the men (Umunna) in the words of Ene (2007), "...take a back seat and abide by the rulings of Umuada". (p.6). They accord certain rights to their relations both in their happy and sorrowful times and frown at their brother's actions when they go to the police or law courts to settle their disputes. According to them, the money spent there can be utilized effectively for the interest of the family/community. Any of their brothers that disobey them is usually asked to pay a certain amount of money as penalty and must also withdraw the case from wherever he took it.

The usefulness of Umuada in the community cannot be compromised for any thing. Ogbalu (n.d.) agreed to this when he said that, "Umuada play important roles through their leaders in the recommendation of abolition or modification of customs, taboos, nature and performance of festivals, rituals and observances pertaining to women to the governing authorities (Ozo na otu Nze na Ozo elders)."(p.28). An example of this kind is how a widow mourns the death of her husband in the past. As a matter of detail, the primary interest of Umuada is to see that peace reigns in their places of birth. They want to see that their brothers and their wives together with their children are at peace with each other so that whenever they visit from their husbands places, they will meet

everybody well and happy.

Umuada are sometimes strict but fair in their interventions and enforcements. They come to make peace in marriages having problems within their lineage such that they deal with men that misbehave. They also teach the unfaithful and uncaring wives of their relative's lessons in a hard way. For example, if a man maltreats his wife and no one would stop him, Umuada will step in and stop him from doing so. On the other hand, if a woman married into the family becomes unruly, Umuada will intervene and resolve the matter even if it entails forcing the bad wife back to her fathers' house to retreat from the unruly act and make amends. In extreme cases, where their judgements/laws are not kept as decided, they can ostracize and even place a curse on an intractable member of the family. Sometimes also they can ostracize their member that did not keep to their rules and regulations only to be readmitted if she shows signs of remorse and pays the necessary penalty given for the offence committed.

As a group, they are decent and dynamic in their decisions and actions. They are great arbiters and because they come from their husbands' homes, they do not have to stay back in the community to face anyone on a regular basis. This affirms the reason why Isichei, (1977) argued that:

...they brought much pressure to bear on any bad things that were going on in the town, village or their family. Particularly they were charged with the affairs of the women in general, but they went far to make sure that women married into the town from other towns were conforming to the norms of the town. (p.74)

They disciplined the offending women through serious sanctions that ranged from seizure of property to the isolation of the culprit from their affairs. As mothers, sisters, wives and even widows, they were customarily called upon to determine ownership of economic trees and land boundaries in matters of land disputes. As daughters of the soil, they arbitrated disputes occurring in their paternal homes and exercised tremendous influence in the community. They are also very active in group politics. On this, Isichie (1977) also reported that:

they help the women folk support the wise decisions of the village assemblies. You know how effective the support of the women would be in the affairs of the town. You also might have heard of the role of Umuokpu as peace makers during warfare between us and any other town. (p.74).

A typical case in point was when a Parish priest in one of the catholic churches in Urualla was murdered; the Umuada went en mass for two days to rebel against the bastardly act by kneeling and going round the entire town praying for God's intervention. On the second day, they sat on the floor from morning till night at the Eze Urualla's palace to register their grief and for the Eze Urualla and his cabinet members to go all the way out to fish out and bring to book the people behind the evil act. For the two days, they all fasted too. At last, their actions yielded good fruits as it led to negotiations and discussions that resolved the case between the community where the Priest was born, the then Catholic Bishop of Orlu Diocese and the Urualla community. The action of the Umuada helped to bring to book some suspects that were not indigenes of Urualla thereby setting Urualla people free of the allegation.

In the past also, the Umuada Urualla performed various rites and sacrifices for the peace and progress of the town. They acted as the custodians of religious morality, and are responsible for the ritual cleansing (Ikpu aru) of their parental homes. They also performed purification and reincarnation rituals for their homes, other desecrated areas in the lineage and even the birth rites of their off springs. Nowadays, such things no longer exist.

Before the advent of Christianity, no Nwada of Urualla was buried outside her father's

home. No matter where she was married to, her corpse must be brought back to her father's home for burial. As there were no vehicles then, the corpse of a deceased Nwada was usually carried on the head by his relatives back to their paternal home for burial no matter the distance. Nowadays such practices have ceased to exist. It is expected that every 'nwada' attends the burial of her relative whether male or female except for the excused ones otherwise she will be fined. They act as support network for the lineage widows, conduct vigils and provide material support for the funerals of their lineage men.

In recent times, they play important roles during funerals. They go to their birth places for the burial of their dead relatives. They also visit their dead members' birth places to show their presence after the member's burial at her husband's home. In those days also, they stay there for about three to four days before going back to their respective homes. Presently, they disperse after the burial and return the following day to tidy up their activities but the immediate family members of the deceased stay back. Appendix II shows some pictures of a cross section of Umuada in full attendance in one of their brother's burial and the researcher interviewing and collecting information concerning them. Appendix III represents food items presented to them for entertainment at such gatherings. Of particular importance is the presentation of the waist of any animal (ukwu anu) slaughtered, whether cow or goat. This is an official right of Umuada as a tradition.

After the burial of any "nwa ada" in her husbands place, the children of the deceased usually go to visit the Umuada who are converged in their mother's place with food and drinks a day after the burial of their mother to appreciate them and to ascertain that they got home safely. This kind of visit is called 'Unu larukwara'. In those days also, a particular dish called 'oku akwu' was always prepared for Umuada at burials. 'Oku akwu' is a type of dish served in a 50cm basin usually yam porridge with big rounded dry fishes. The yams are prepared in full tubers without slicing and the round fishes not broken. The fish are arranged on top of the yams. Umuada also settle cases (if any) at such occasions.

In those days, they were so powerful and were highly dreaded that they often make the men or even the council of elders take actions contrary to the latter's wish. History has it that if they were seriously offended, they usually visit the offender's compound nude, and in some extreme cases they could go as far as defecating in the person's compound. Today, such things have ceased to exist. However, they now act as part of checks and balances in socio-political organizations to ensure that things are done right.

Umuada play important roles in the marriage of their relatives especially in their traditional marriages. In many cases, they act as middle persons, steering the assumed good guys from their husband's community to get married to the potentially good girls in their native community. They also play some advisory role to the Eze Urualla especially when they observe that the Eze is not handling his civic duties to the admiration of his subjects.

Umuada Urualla often embark on some physical developmental project. One of such projects is the ongoing town hall and library still under construction. Their source of fund is through levies and donations from good spirited members of the community. Some donations are also attracted from burial ceremonies especially from the burial ceremony of their deceased members. One of their major events during burial ceremonies is called 'nne m ezigbo nne day'. This is a day set aside specially for Umuada (general) to get-together for the burial rite of their member. The children and grandchildren of the deceased member are expected to donate food items, gifts and money to the union. Some relatives, friends and other well wishers of the deceased family also support the children by donating money to the union as the children and grand children dance at the ceremony. A particular percentage of the money realized at the end of the ceremony is

usually given to the immediate members of the bereaved family while the balance is shared amongst the other members that participated. In the case of the burial of their deceased male relative, the money realized during the Umuada dance is shared amongst themselves without giving any to the immediate family of the deceased. The gifts and money mentioned above are given to appreciate the Umuada as they dance around at the occasion. The occasion of (nne m ezigbo nne) is performed in general by Umuada to the children of their deceased member as a mark of their last respect to their fallen colleague. It is usually done two days after the burial of their member or on any other day after the burial that may be agreed to be convenient for both the children and the Umuada.

The Future of Umuada in the Present Day Time.

This paper has discussed extensively the issue of Umuada Igbo in general but with particular reference to Urualla town. It is therefore important to note here that what comes out clear from the explanation of this group of women is that they are women who have historically organised themselves into Igbo life and culture with useful gendered roles and identities for the development of their community. (Ilogu, 1975). To this, Ogbalu, observed that the women as Umuada have done so much in their various towns, villages and lineages such that some of their activities have been highly appreciated while some were abhorred. (1981). This is as a result of the modern faith-based formations, such as Christian mothers associations, different women groups, and other economic-driven setups, like 'Otu isusu', town unions of women wings etc, which have some what diluted the colour and vivacity of Umuada. The roles of migration and urbanization of people are not left out here as most women rarely visit their birth places not to talk of knowing what goes on there. This aggravated the opinion of Ohakim (2009) when he reiterated the importance of the roles of Umuada as "the protagonists of womens rights and experiences by collectively perpetuating the mens centered ideas". (p.4). Some of the practical issues exhibited by the Umuada in the past which were frowned at are today being corrected since these same Umuada who are married somewhere else will one day face the same situation in their marital homes. Some of those issues were quite discriminatory and spiteful and so are no longer tenable in the present state of civilization of the society. Ajaeree, (2003) acknowledged that, "... most women who are strongly built in their faith no longer associate with them due to their greed, bad attributes, corrupt practices and fetish beliefs".(p.84). However, there is still need for the Umuada union to still exist because in as much as some of their practices were abhorred, they still have something good to offer to their relatives, children and the society. Besides, most of those bad practices have stopped.

Some of the findings of this paper reveal that most communities especially Urualla town welcome and treat the children of Umuada very well. For instance, if the children of Umuada encounter difficulties, they and their families are welcomed in their mothers' home/community as 'umudiala/nwadiala' (children/child of the citizen). They can stay for as long as they wish, and are encouraged and supported to return to their fathers' community as soon as conditions permit. A typical example of such is the reception given to Okonkwo in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* by his mother's kinsmen in Mbanta when he and his family fled from his town to his mother's town. Okonkwo was exiled for 7 years from his clan Umuofia to his mother's place Mbanta because of the inadvertent crime he committed (manslaughter). His gun exploded and killed Ezeudu's 16 year old son who was dancing during his father's funeral. (Achebe, 1958, pp.89 & 93). As Nwadiala, (a child of their daughter) the people of Mbanta accommodated and helped Okonkwo and his entire household for those seven years before their return to their village Umuofia.

In a society where banking did not exist, the institution served the members in the words of Ogbalu (n.d.), as "...a bank for they continue to receive dividends each time a new member is

admitted till their death”. (p.28). However small a woman’s share might be, she is always hopeful of clearing some of her financial commitments through the shares she gets from the union that year. To her, it is usually a joy to hear that a new member is to be admitted and she makes much noise about it.

It is therefore a thing of joy to note that the concept of Umuada continues to exist. New formations emerge in some urban cities/towns and even in faraway places like America and Europe. Nowadays, the body seeks to elevate to national levels, the role Umuada Igbo play in their native families. The Umuada Urualla today is into micro credit-schemes to assist the women to set up small businesses to cater for themselves and their families. They periodically arrange prayer sessions for the peace, unity and progress of Urualla, organize seminars and workshops to train Urualla women in some small scale businesses and health care needs especially in areas of family planning and in the prevention and control of HIV/AIDS.

They dialogue and suggest ways to ameliorate conflict resolution and mediation. They have helped to address the issue of greed, revenge, injustice and abuse of human dignity amongst themselves and their late relative’s wives. They have in particular helped to prevent and eliminate violence and some wicked acts on widows thereby making them feel relieved of the pain and burden inflicted by the death of their beloved ones. With these developments and some others not mentioned, there is every need for them to be supported, recognized, felt and respected so that their dreams and values which are for the good of Urualla town in particular and Igbo people in general will not be plunged into the abyss of annihilation.

Conclusion and Recommendations:

This paper cannot be concluded without mentioning the fact that the role of Umuada Urualla in the preservation and promotion of peace need not be over emphasized. When women rise and call the bluff of men, peace percolates. Where women rumble with the men, anarchy often rears its ugly head. Therefore women do not need anyone’s permission to organize themselves since they have been applauded for their giant steps to move forward ever. In doing so, they should be more redemptive than punitive since their aim is to achieve peace in their lineage.

They have also been identified as one of the strategic groups that can help the town for their vision projects. They wield substantial power and influence in Urualla community, as well as in the executive and legislative arms of the council of Urualla traditional elders and the Eze Urualla cabinet. With its great numerical strength, their presence, and strong networks at the villages, kindreds and families, the Umuada Urualla have the ability to mobilize their members and their children, for the up keep of the town which cuts across various socio-political and economic strata. It is this very network that they use in achieving all the laudable aims and objectives of their projects.

The paper therefore recommends that Umuada Urualla should be encouraged, supported and allowed to exist. They should continue to mobilize Urualla women for the interest of unity, peace and progress of Urualla. They should be encouraged to eliminate such harmful traditional practices that deter their progress in the fight for the development and progress of Urualla. Through their individual experiences, talents and exposures, they should be empowered to rise to high positions of religious, social and political authorities needed to challenge the present situation of the nation.

Finally, Umuada Urualla should be encouraged and supported in their projects and all other endeavours carried out for the good of Urualla town, the Umuada themselves and their children. With these and all other developments by the Umuada Urualla, Urualla people will experience peace, a healthy environment and an improved community ever.

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