

Chapter Eleven

A HISTORICAL ASSESSMENT OF THE PLACE OF UMUADA IGBO IN PEACE AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN OGWUANIOCHA

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Abstract

The Umuada Igbo in Igboland is one of the most organized, peaceful and endowed women groups in Nigeria. As individuals and as groups, their contributions as farmers, civil workers and managers of human welfare are central to the ability of households, communities and nation to tackle the challenges of conflict sometimes occasioned by poverty, misrule and masculine domination and intimidation. It is to be noted, that women in Nigeria in particular and Africa in general, have been relegated to the background in terms of peace building, conflict management, and political participation as a result of the masculine belief that women's role are limited to their homes. The Umuada Igbo like other women groups from other nations have suffered the same fate, but this does not deter them from making concerted efforts to contribute to peace building and conflict resolution in their communities. These traditional and modern contributions have made them a force to be reckoned with in the political, economic, religious and social life of the nation. The justification for this study stems from a need to refute the misconception that women are irrelevant in peace and conflict resolution initiatives in Nigeria. This paper adopts the historical analysis method in our aid to discover the role of Umuada in conflict resolution in Ogwuaniocha. A major recommendation is that women should be given equal opportunities in both appointive and elective positions to enable them make contributions to peacebuilding and conflict management. This will help to maintain lasting peace and unity in various communities in Nigeria.

Keywords: *Umuada, Peace, Peace building, Conflict resolution, Ogwuaniocha*

Introduction

All over the world, womenfolk are regarded as the weaker sex. This implies that what a man can do, a woman might not be able to do. This has the effect of confining women to particular spheres and assigning them certain roles

only. In Igbo land in particular, the women are expected to operate within the kitchen mostly. This study is therefore an assessment of the role of Umuada in peace and conflict resolution in Ogwuaniocha, a town in Ogbaru local government area of Anambra state. The aim is to debunk the notion that women are inferior to men and are not capable of achieving any significant feat like their male counterparts and hence put an end to the discrimination. The Umuada are regarded as the powerful daughters in Igbo culture. Umuada means “daughter of the same male ancestor”. They are also referred to in common parlance as “daughters of the soil”. It is a collective term for all daughters born in any family and is formed from two Igbo words: Umu and Ada. Umu is a generic plural word that conveys the sense of many. Ada is a name but also means daughter. In generic usage, every Igbo woman is “Ada” and is recognized as such even in her matrimonial home.

Specifically, this work focuses on the association of indigenous women of Igbo communities known as Umuada with particular reference to the Ogwuaniocha Umuada group as a case study. Ogwuaniocha is located on the River Niger banks between Onitsha and the Niger delta. Some of the major riverine towns in this region known as Ogbaru are Ndoni in present day Bayelsa, Ochuche, Ogwuaniocha, Ogwuikpele Ogbakuba, Odekpe, and Osomala in present day Anambra on the Eastern bank; and Oko hand Utchiin present day Delta state, on the western bank. These riverine towns share a common culture and similar life style influenced by their shared dependence on the River Niger. Not surprising, they are united by common beliefs, similar language and comparable world views which have evolved into a lifestyle and philosophy known as Ogbaru culture.

In diverse ways, present day Ogwuaniocha, is what may be regarded as a society refashioned to a large extent by attitudes formed by association with external influences. These influences have mostly come from outside Igboland and derive from such activities as the slavetrade, colonization and the amalgamation of present Northern and Southern Nigeria in 1914 by the British colonial administration. Others include external economic and social relations (trade, missionaries, and education), the First and Second World Wars, Independence and the Nigeria-Biafra civil wars.

From history women over the years have played major and important roles in the economic, political, social and cultural development of Nigeria. Thus the popular Aba women’s riot was an act of the women to show that they cannot be easily intimidated. They took to the streets to protest the news that the white colonial masters wanted to introduce direct taxation which implies that women would henceforth begin to pay tax like their husbands. (Obienusi, 2018:100).

Again, examples of individual women who played prominent roles abound. For instance, there is Mrs. Margaret Ekpo who was a fierce Nigerian women's rights activist and a pioneering female politician in Nigeria; also Mrs Janet Mokelu, a member of the Eastern House of Assembly, who mobilised women and demonstrated against the killing of twenty-one miners who were protesting non-payment of mine allowance in Enugu; and late Mrs. Olufunmilayo Ransome-Kuti who was involved in the politics of the Western Region. Yet others would include Mallama Gambo Sawabo, who waged a fierce battle for the political and cultural emancipation of women in the north. Prof Dora Akunyili pioneered the anti-fake drug campaign that saw the destruction of millions of fake drugs in Onitsha and elsewhere in Nigeria. There is also Dr Ngozi Okonjo Iweala, a finance expert amongst many others.

In Igboland in general and Ogbaru in particular, the Umuada is a major player in peace building, conflict management and culture preservation. They are at the fore front of bringing peace to homes, families and villages where peace is lacking, sometimes as a result of culture conflict, marriage conflict, burial and other social injustices which are often meted out to women in their localities. The desire to speak out in one voice and free themselves from the suppression of the male counterparts led to the formation of the Umuada group as well as other groups. These other groups include the titled women, Christian mothers, Ndinyom, Association of market women and the modern day professionals were all formed and designed to represent and protect women interests. The Umuada made up of daughters of the clan, is different from "Ndinyom" which is another group comprising only married women within a clan as well. These women are generally grouped in their political, economic and social life power sharing. (Obasi and Nnamani: 2015)

The most important of these female forums however, remains the Umuada Igbo which is at the vanguard in the struggle for equal opportunities for women and children in the society. The ideology of Umuada was created by tradition during the pre-colonial era when women were held sacred and they participated in collective decision making meetings on sensitive issues that concerned them. Their involvement in this process was done through the representation of the Umuada. (Nwokafor: 2012). In a particular sense also, Ada refers to the first female born in a family; she may often be called "Adaobi". Umuada connotes therefore, many daughters in a social group in the same lineage (Uchem: 2001).

To maintain their status, Igbo women organize themselves from childhood for the work of motherhood. From the young age of ten to puberty, girls form **lkpaonu** or **enwe-oru** form groups to assist in the farm work. They take turns to farm for the family of each member until they have gone round the circle. They can be hired occasionally, but the main purpose of the group is to

contribute to the economic wellbeing of the family members. This group of girls is part of the Umuada. The place of the Umuada Igbo in Ogwuaniocha as agents of peace building and conflict resolution becomes the thrust of this paper.

Theoretical Framework

This article will employ the feminist theory to substantiate the nature of gender inequality against women. The term feminism can be used to describe a political, cultural or economic movement aimed at establishing equal rights and legal protection for women. Feminism involves political and sociological theories and philosophies concerned with issues of gender difference, as well as a movement that advocates gender equality for women and campaigns for women's rights and interests. According to Maggie Humm and Rebecca Walker, the history of feminism can be divided into three waves. The first feminist wave was in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the second was in the 1960s and 1970s, and the third extends from the 1990s to the present. This inequality has greatly affected the role of women in the society as peace makers, peace builders and conflict managers. Feminist theory aims to understand the nature of gender inequality. It examines women and men's social roles, experiences, interests, chores, and feminist politics in a variety of fields, including anthropology and sociology, communication, media studies, psychoanalysis, home economics, literature, education, and philosophy. Feminist theory focuses on analysing gender inequality. Themes explored in feminism include discrimination, objectification (especially sexual objectification), oppression, patriarchy, stereotyping, art history and contemporary art and aesthetics.

Toril Moi (2000) in her work 'What is a Woman? And Other Essays' puts it thus: "a woman defines herself through the way she lives her embodied situation in the world, or in other words, through the way in which she makes something of what the world makes of her". Therefore, a woman must regain subject, to escape her defined role as "other", as a Cartesian point of departure. This means a woman must live a life that speaks volumes of the true nature of the woman.

Over the years the women folk have been discriminated against, neglected, undermined and disqualified in certain political, economic and social positions, simply because they are expected to take care of the family and nothing more. They are to take care of house chores, care for the children as well as satisfy their husband's conjugal demands. Despite this discrimination meted out to the women folk, it has never deterred them from attempting to showcase their potentialities and capabilities to the world.

Women are denied positions of honour for no other reasons than their gender. In reality however, women who have been granted chances and opportunities have shown that they are capable of excelling in diverse careers and positions

of power. Thus we have Professor Grace Alele-Williams, an educator who made history as the first Nigerian woman to become the head (vice-chancellor) of a Nigerian university, the University of Benin. She was also the first Nigerian woman to receive a doctorate degree. Prof Adetoun Ogunsheye, Nigeria's first female professor, Professor **Sophie Oluwole**, the first Nigerian woman to get a PhD in Philosophy and a whole lot of others have equally excelled. The feminist theory will serve as our framework in this study.

Historical Origin of Umuada in Ogwuaniocha

The origin of Umuada group in Ogwuaniocha dates back to the 20th century. This period was characterized by male dominance in the society. During this period the men were the only source of authority in the home. Women could not take decisions and could not be seen where decisions were being taken. They were thus regarded as inferior to men and were just not accorded much recognition. In a bid to obtain more credible and reliable information about the origin of the Umuada in Ogwuaniocha, an interview was conducted with some elderly but well informed women in the community.

In an interview, Iyom Adabuife Ogbonna (c.93) years, Obianulo Anudu (c.90) and Umegbolu Onuzulike (80) years, who were among the oldest women in Umuoleke village, and the custodians of Umuada/Umuokpu group, affirmed that Umuada group in Ogwuaniocha started after the Aba women's riot. One of the women reminded us during the interview that they did not record events with exact dates during their time. Since they were illiterates, they merely related happenings (such as child birth, etc.) to major events, to help them remember and make necessary reference.

Oral history has it that at the time, a man named Nwamife was loved so much by his people that they made him their leader. He was said to have two wives. On a certain day, during a ceremony in the village, Nwamife fired a gun shot in jubilation and unfortunately a little boy who was on top of a mango tree was hit by the stray bullet and he fell and died. The custom required that Nwamife must be put to death in order to appease the gods of the land and to avert more calamities from befalling the villagers. The only alternative was for him to sacrifice one of his sons in his stead. He implored his wives to give him one of their sons but none agreed to do so. It was Nwamife's eldest sister Adaku who was married to a man from another town, Utsham that came to the rescue. She convinced her husband to accept to offer their own son as a sacrifice to redeem Nwamife's life.

After the incident, Nwamife viewed his sister's action as unprecedented and made it clear that his sister would be the head of his family when he died, and that whatever she said would stand, even in the presence of his sons. This incidence prompted other men in the village to ascribe respect to their married sisters, since they could be of great help to their brothers when matters of

such huge magnitudes cropped up. From then onwards, the married women decided to form a group to help settle issues, render help and contribute to the maintenance of peace, law and order in their father's homes.

The Umuada group is thus made up of the women who are married, irrespective of whether they are married in this village, the neighbouring village or even in distant towns. They are well organised and their leadership changes from time to time in order to enforce integrity and discipline among themselves for effective performance. They remain concerned with the affairs of the women in general, but they go far to make sure that women married into the town from other towns conform to the norms of the town. Sanctions employed to enforce discipline range from seizure of property to ostracizing the culprits from their group activities. Consequently, the Umuada group is one of the most organized, peaceful and endowed women groups in Ogbaru land. As individuals and as groups, they equally take part in the economic and cultural life of the people; ensure that the village squares and places of religious worships are neatly kept.

The Umuada and Conflict Resolution

Peace is sine quanon to human co-existence in every society. Peace is freedom from war and violence, especially when people live and work together happily without disagreements. Conflict is a serious difference between two or more beliefs, ideas, or interests. If two beliefs, ideas, or interests are in conflict, they are very different. Though conflict cannot be totally absent in any society but it could be managed. Conflict is a clash of interests. It is inevitable and can bring disaster to the family and community. The Umuada helps to control and manage it. Conflict is a Latin word, *confligere* which means to strike together. Lederach (2000: 71) sees conflict as composed of three elements: people, process and problems. Any of these combinations may cause conflict and will always be present in the development and outcome of a dispute. People are very often at the centre of disputes. The processes and methods of settling disputes differ from group to group, but the Umuada usually grant the people involved the opportunity to express their opinions and ideas regarding their cases. No case ever proves too complex for the Umuada, as they would approach it with their republican style.

Onwudufor (2018), makes the observation that when men have exhausted their conflict resolution strategies and peace remains elusive, the women are quickly summoned. Once they step in, victory becomes certain. Consequently, women are greatly respected in their paternal homes and to disrespect them attracts grave sanctions to an offender irrespective of his personal attitude or emotions. Obiefuna (2017) in concurring with Onwudufor's view on the sanctions often given to offenders maintains that such sanctions could range from women marching around one's compound unclad and in protest, to ex-communication of an offender together with all members of his household. In this latter case,

no member of the community is permitted to have any dealings with such a person until his death. This is considered a most grievous matter among the Igbo people.

Conflict management involves efforts and the interventions to minimize, limit, contain, control or regulate conflict. It is a process of minimizing and controlling the negative effects of conflict through working with the disputing parties. Some writers use conflict prevention synonymously with conflict management. Whatever the term, it seeks to reduce the negative and destructive capacity of conflict based on the realization that conflict is inevitable and that not all conflicts are resolved always. Irresolvable conflicts are controlled and managed.

Suffice it to say that the Umuada Igbo take two approaches to conflict management. Through the conciliatory approach they make the conflicting parties to explore ways towards finding an amicable resolution to the conflict. They could also approach conflict management through force and threat to stem the negative effects of the conflict. It is crucial to note however that the Umuada do not employ the force and threat approach arbitrarily. Prior to its deployment, all other strategies would have been engaged in the bid to make the warring parties settle for a peaceful negotiation. The Umuada have therefore played and continue to play a significant role in maintaining and resolving conflicts in Ogwuaniocha hence this research. One can only begin to imagine the dimensions which several conflicts in the communities would have taken, if not for the timely and efficient intervention of the Umuada.

Umuada and Marital Conflict in Ogwuaniocha

The Umuada group in Ogwuaniocha has over the years been instrumental to settling marriage dispute between couples. Marital disputes are varied in nature and are mostly handled by the immediate families involved. However, it is also true that some rather complex marital problems have to be resolved outside the boundaries of the immediate family. In a 2018 interview with Adabuife, an elderly woman and one of the custodians of the Umuada group, she observes that marriage disputes involving a wife who constantly insults her mother-in-law is only settled by the Umuada group. The Umuada does this by inviting the parties involved to their meeting. The wife is there informed about their laws against such offences as well as the attendant penalty, in the event that she commits the offence again. Such a warning to an offending wife is expected to serve as a major caution to forestall further disputes, since a recurrence of such an offence will earn her the ultimate penalty of being sent away permanently, from her husband's home. From the foregoing, one sees clearly how the Umuada are able to readily resolve disputes by issuing stern cautions to offenders and following such up with the implementation of prescribed sanctions when the needs arise. Indeed unless such measures are put in place, several altercations will linger thereby causing

more harm to the families involved. The Umuada usually intervene in marital issues between couples within their family kindred. This involves placing certain sanctions on the guilty person and meting out appropriate disciplinary measures in accordance with laid down family structures.

Umuada remains a last resort for conflict resolution. Mrs Adakaego a leader of one of the Umuada groups explains (also in an interview, 2017) that Umuada do not just wade into any marital conflict, but intervene only when all other available options have been explored. This goes to prove the potentialities of women in peace building, peace management and conflict resolution. If these women were confined to their family affairs alone, they would be unable to intervene meaningfully in disputes that might otherwise have done great damages to homes.

On cases involving infidelity on the part of married women, another leader of the Umuada revealed in an interview that such issues are not treated with levity, because it is against the customs of the land. Moreover, it could lead to the death of a husband who aware of his wife's infidelity conceals it. This informant added that their group first ensures the guilt of an accused person. This is to avoid the wrong accusation of an innocent person. When it is truly established that the accused is guilty, she will be subjected to an open confession of her crime before the women. Thereafter, she is to tender unreserved apology to her husband. Certain items required for a mandatory ritual cleansing as stipulated by tradition must also be provided by this female. It is believed that this would remove her guilt and purify her womanhood.

These activities will then prevent the husband of such a female from terminating the marriage. Such a marriage would thus be saved as a direct result of the Umuada's intervention and also as a sign of the deep respect accorded the Umuada group by all and sundry. In this community, it is noteworthy that only women are able to settle such cases involving a wife's infidelity to her husband, especially in situations where all efforts by family members have proved ineffectual. One notes also that in cases involving marital infidelity, the Umuada usually come in to intervene, whether they are invited or not. Their preoccupations remains solely to bring lasting peace eliminate subjugation and infuse in the people a sense of forgiveness and justice. It is also significant to note here that men are never accused of marital unfaithfulness because they are at liberty to marry as many wives as they so desire.

The Umuada in Igbo Socio-Political Setting

The Umuada group is the group uniting all other women in the community. They take the centre stage in conflict resolution and management in all issues concerning women at every level in the community. Various groups like the market women associations, social clubs, dance groups, etc., serve as watch

dogs of public morality and conviviality. Umuada traverses all these various women Igbo groups, both the old and the new. It remains a well-known fact that men dominate in socio-political affairs in Igbo land, but women remain required for the successful resolution of complex conflicts resulting from domestic issues. At such times, men often withdraw to the rear seats.

In Igbo land generally, the authority of the Umuada can be felt visibly in conflict management and resolution in virtually all but land disputes. In the land matters, they may offer their views and opinions, but all final decision lie with men. We have exceptions to this position however in Ogwuaniocha and parts of Ogbaru. The area of chieftaincy matters is another, in which women have very limited roles to play. It is important to observe however, that some communities are reconsidering this cultural policy, with a view to appointing women into the cabinet of the Igwe or the Eze.

In any case of dispute adjudged by the Umuada, one equally notes that they aim for neutrality. They would normally carry out their investigations so as to obtain the facts of the case. These would subsequently be analysed and appropriate decisions reached. In cases where offenders are found guilty, appropriate punitive measures will be apportioned as well. The decision of the Umuada is usually final on such matters. The Umuada can act as a “court of arbitration”, and as mediators in conflicts. They could also ask a guilty party to pay a fine, to cook a certain meal, to bring a cock or ram and in addition to bring some kola nuts for reconciliation purposes. Of course the reconciliation would require that the guilty party be pardoned, and forgiveness accepted by all involved.

The self-assigned task of the Umuada includes dealing with cases involving young unmarried girls who get pregnant. In such instances, the girls are fined or even ostracized, while their mothers may on occasion be punished as well. Furthermore, some of such unmarried girls are made to marry widowers after undergoing certain purification rites. Some parents are forced to give out their girls in marriage, (even against the girl’s wish), in order to avoid the shame such pregnancies bring to families.

Agbasiere (2000: 39) opines that “apart from their general role as advisers, women have their council of female elders, parallel to the council of male elders.” In critical situations both councils could meet together for deliberations and consultations. Igbo women in general are expected to perform the role of “watch dogs” of public morality.

Women may demonstrate their political pressure through their meetings, “which may be inter- or intra-lineage in structure and usually operative under the aegis of the most senior married women”. Perhaps, it is because of this

public morality that the women demand that the girl child behaves in ways that truly reflects that women are character moulders in every society. "The powers of Umuada are as extensive as they are ambivalent and the task of disciplining disobedient relatives' wives also falls within their domain... the Umuada have the power to ostracize any proven incorrigible (male) lineage relative. In consequence, the funeral of such a person would be boycotted, which would initiate a ritual crisis, since the services of the Umuada in the funeral of a relative are regarded as indispensable" (Agbasiere, 2000:41-42).

Today Christianity has affected the life and role of women in Igbo land. In certain issues like marriage and pre-marital pregnancy, the traditional strictness is no longer there, although it is still being frowned at. In the past fifty years, the women have come to have two well established groups, the home and abroad women groups. All other women groups, such as professionals, market and cultural groups have fall into these two groups. They meet once a year in what has come to be known today as the "August Return". Others call it August general meeting or "Home and Abroad Meeting". Whatever name it is called, one of the aims of the August meeting is to resolve outstanding issues of conflict. According to Nwokafor, (2012:33), the initial purpose of forming the association and beginning the meetings was for the welfare of the women and community development.

The Role of Umuada in the Making and Implementation of Laws and Maintaining Peace and Order in Ogwuaniocha

Laws against spousal maltreatment in marriages were made by the Umuada group in order to protect both spouses from maltreatment or lack of care. Mrs Ngozi Ubanede (another respondent), attests to the fact that this law has made the menfolk to respect their wives even though it did not prevent them from marrying any number of wives they desired.

Laws prohibiting crime and theft were also made by the Umuada and defaulters are punishable by excommunication from the community. When a woman steals another person's property for instance, she may be punished by excommunication from the village. She may also be made to parade around the village unclad and carrying on her head whatever she stole, while the people laugh and jeer at her. Laws against immorality, getting pregnant out of wedlock, etc. were made by the Umuada and punishment for defaulter's range from being stripped and flogged publicly to excommunication from community activities.

The Umuada made laws prohibiting fights and other vices that could cause harm to an individual or his property especially during disputes. Defaulters faced the punishment of being banished from the village; excommunication from taking part in what other women do, or having any relationship with anybody in the community. Another respondent Mrs. Oluchi Ugonabo (2018

interview), finally points out how the laws serve as mirrors through which the people see themselves and thus become careful not to fall prey to the consequences of breaking any.

Umuada and Social Justice

The Igbo women's participation in the socio-cultural and socio-political life of the Igbo nation pre-dates the advent of European civilization. Village squares serve as places and centres of cultural and economic life of the communities. In the many sub-groups formed by women, their major concern remains the welfare of their members and the ultimate good of the community.

Their meetings thus focus on the establishment and operation of just institutions and the protection of the dignity of women and men. Pre-colonial Igbo women's groups were based on the principles of social equality, and non-discrimination amongst everybody in the society. The women were held in high esteem in terms of respect by their male counterparts. Uchem (2000:113) observes that "Igbo women at this period were not marginalized in the traditional Igbo society because of their relatively high economic status". The women usually involve themselves in long distance trades where they engage in buying and selling of goods, which in turn yield them high profits.

Although they were culturally and ritually subordinated, they were not seen as inferior nor powerless, neither were they marginalized in the traditional setting. This was because of the Igbo dual-sex socio-political system which provided gender checks and balances. Any discrimination, especially against fellow women is frowned at and where it is pronounced, the women come into it whether invited or uninvited. Men usurped most of the traditional social rights of women with the advent of colonization. Uchem again affirms that "Igbo women became divested of their traditional institutional power by the colonial policies, which marginalized women, were perpetuated by the Igbo male elite and reinforced by the inherited Christianity." Things thus became as they are now since those traditional structures which formerly protected women had been undermined by colonialism and Western Christianity. For that very reason, Igbo women no longer have a collective political bargaining power for defending themselves. While it could be said that colonialism affected the role of women in Africa in general, and Igbo land in particular, western education enhanced the life of women and empowered them to know and affirm their dignity and rights.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The role of women in the socio-political and economic development of Nigeria cannot be overemphasized. Women clearly play key roles in conflict resolution and management in their various communities to augment or complement the roles of men in ensuring peace in the community in particular, and the nation as a whole. This is where the Umuada's role comes to the fore, with its

indispensable contributions. The Umuada consequently play key roles especially where the men folk have exhausted their instruments of peace without success. This means that disputes which tend to linger, because they have defied efforts at resolution quickly begin to look resolvable once the Umuada are called upon to wade into such matters.

This paper recommends that women at all levels should be given leadership positions in all spheres of our national life because of the peace and decorum they are bound to bring to our community and nation at large. A family without a woman is never always complete, a community without a woman is never always successful and a nation without the input of women can never get it right.

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