Umuada as the Last Resort for Peace in Igbo Family: Example from Nwadike's *Adaeze*

Fidelia Nwoye
ASUDEB, Awka

Chisom Nneamaka Okafor
Linguistics/Igbo Department
Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University
Igbariam Campus

Eunice Uchenna Akpamgbo
Linguistics/Igbo Department
Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University
Igbariam Campus

Abstract
Women in traditional Igbo society are a force in political, legal and social issues. This is true of the Umuada whom in the past and till date have remained a force to reckon with in the Igbo society. They have also rendered invaluable services to the Igbo political organization. This study is set to investigate the nature and significance of the roles played by Umuada. To achieve this, the descriptive method of research was adopted. The major source of data for this study are the selected text and other related literature. Findings revealed that Umuada, though mostly women, have a great impact on their birth homes. The paper suggests that Umuada be given a stronger support to operate to help curb family problems that spring up from time to time which if left unattended to, breeds a bigger problem for the society at large.
Keywords: **Igbo society, Umuada, Politics, Experience**

Introduction

Long before the colonization of Africa, women have been a powerful part of the Igbo society. They are a force in political, traditional and social issues. They have much more power than was generally recognized by early authors, Arinze (1970). 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 interest as the Umuada guild. 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 generic plural prefix conveys the sense of many. Most naturally every Igbo woman or girl is an "Ada" though the word is generally used most often to refer to the first daughter of a family.

Ogbalu (N.D) acknowledged that "Ada is the same of every first born female of a woman. The institution prevails almost everywhere. Umuada as the members are called, are women born in a particular town, married or unmarried (p.28). Continuing, he also coined what may be called "Umuokpu".

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

In a poetic form, Maduekwe (1979) beautifully described Umuada as "both married and unmarried daughters who have chairs in both their homes and their husbands' homes. They occupy positions and serve as both daughters of the soil in the ancestral land and wives in their husband's place'. Here '…who have chairs…' does not mean chairs in its physical form rather it means that these women have

strong positions both in their birth homes and in their husbands' homes. 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' place with their interests being uppermost in the heart 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. The Umuada constitute a very influential social and political force. This means that they also participate in the politics village politics to make sure that the best candidate for particular position is chosen. Ofomata (2002) opined that Umuada represents a gender platform for cultural revival, rural development, integrated health care and advocacy. When a woman marries outside the village or town, she remain an "ada of her father's community'.

Ene (2007) supported this view and argued that '... the membership of Umuada is conferred particularly from the father's side of the family'. He went further to explain that '... any woman who does not belong to the group is either an outcast or has been ostracized by her community for some abominable acts". This shows that any married daughter of an Igbo town, no matter her age is automatically qualified to be a member of Umuada in her family, kindred or at the village level. She cannot belong to the Umuada group in her husband's place neither can she command the kind of respect/regard she commands in her birth place where she is married. Agugu, (2006) reiterated this fact and confirmed that "the Umuada are highly regarded and respected in their birth places than in the places where they are married". The respect they get is as a result of the fact that they normally run home to settle disputes in their fathers' house. These women travel far and near to make sure that their fathers' house is in peace. Sometimes the men in the family fear them because they know that when Umuada get involved in any

matter, they see to its finish. This papers shall give a little description about the forming of Umuada and its relevance in Igbo family settings as illustrated in the select text.

Umuada in Igbo Society

Igbo women according to Ene (2007), "have historically asserted themselves into Igbo life and culture with exciting gender roles and identities for meaningful development to appreciate feminism in a world full 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. Concluding, Mbata (2009), still maintained that the man sets the pace to be followed by the women as far as culture is concerned. This 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.

Therefore, the Umuada guild emanated from the coming together of the married daughters of Igbo origin to form a common body. When they got married, they thought it wise to look for an avenue where by they will gather themselves from time to time to talk about one need or the other or even for the sake of seeing and being with one another as sisters. Based on this, they formed the union 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.

Umuada usually have their official meetings five times or as many as they wish in a year including, sometimes, the annual get-together though they often convened meetings as the need arises. They normally choose their leaders mostly from the older members of the group. These chosen members are regarded as people who are very truthful, faithful and possesses 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 the progress of the group.

Functions of Umuada

Umuada 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 a highly distinguished social entity in the Igbo society. 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 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 by-laws that guide them in almost all their activities to avoid neglect and mistake as the case may be. Ene (2007) observed that " Umuada are therefore a register of collective feminism through which Umunne and Umunna can symbolically form a binary human center culturally and in solidarity" (p.5) . Njaka (1974) provides a convincing description of the powers of Umuada in the following passage. He posits thus,

> …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 length

> to avoid a confrontation with the Umuada, this way, the women do, indirectly exert a strong influence on the affairs of the state,

Several historical examples demonstrates the functions of Umuada. The Umuada were partly responsible for shaping the Igbo history, Abamonye, (1998). In recent years, Umuada has influenced the Igbo local politics by playing a strict role of what Njaka describes as 'custodians of the constitutions". They settle disputes between members and others especially their relatives and in such matters, the men (Umunna) in the word of Ene (2007) 'take a back seat and abide by the rulings of Umuada'. They accord certain rites to their relations both in their happy and sorrowful time and frown at their brothers' actions when they go to the police or law courts to settle their family 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 had reported it.

The usefulness of Umuada in the community cannot be compromised for any reason. Ogbalu (nd) 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)'. An example of this kind is how a widow mourns the death of her husband in the past. 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 live together with their children are at peace with one another so that whenever they visit from their husband's place, 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 that are having problems such that they deal with men who misbehave. They also teach the unfaithful and uncaring wives of their relative's to retrace from their bad behaviors. 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. Sometimes, they will even send messages to her father's house to ask her daughter to retreat from her unruly act and make amends. In extreme cases, where their judgments/law are not kept as decided, they can ostracize their member that did not keep to their rules and regulations only to be readmitted if she shows sign of remorse and pays the necessary penalty meted to her 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 husband's home, 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 to bare any bad things that were going on in their town, village or their family, particularly, they were charged with the affairs of the women in general, but they went farther to make sure that women married into their town from other towns were conforming to the norms of the town. 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 members' burial at their husbands' homes. Prior to civilization, 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. After the burial of a "Nwaada"

in her husband's 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 the mother to appreciate them and to ascertain that they got home safely. This kind of visit is called "Unu narukwara" (did you return safely?). In those days, a particular dish "Ji ororu or "Ji ofe mkpuru Ite" (a special yam delicacy) was always prepare for Umuada at burials. This dish was usually served in a 50cm size basin usually yam porridge with big round dry fishes, the yams were prepared as whole tubers without slicing and the round fishes not broken. The fishes were usually arranged on top of the yam. At gatherings like this, Umuada settle cases (if any).

Prior to this period, they were so powerful and were highly dreaded that they often make the men or even the council of elders take actions contrary to their 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 exit. However, they now act as part of checks and balances in socio political organizations to ensure that things are done rightly.

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 roles to the Eze of their community especially when they observe that the Eze is not handling his civic duties to his subjects as he should. Umuada often embark on some physical developmental project. Most times, they go to the extent of erecting physical structures in their birth places some of which yield money for them. They discipline the

offending women through serious sanctions that range 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 posited that they help the women folk support the wise decision of the village assemblies; knowing how effective the support of the women would be in the affairs of the town.

A typical case of angry Umuada in action in Igbo town, was when a chief priest in charge of one of a shrine was murdered. The Umuada went en masse 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 of their protest, they sat on the floor from morning till night at the Eze's palace to register their grief and for the Eze and his cabinet members to go all the way out to fish out and bring to book the people behind the act. For the two days, they all fasted too. At last their actions led to negotiations and discussions that resolved the case between the community where the chief priest was born and the community where he was murdered. The actions of the Umuada helped to bring to book some suspects that were not indigenes of the community thereby setting the people free of the allegation. Perhaps, if they had not protested, innocent indigenes of the town whom are also relatives of the Umuada would have been arrested while the offenders walked free.

The Umuada in the past also made sacrifices for the peace and progress of the town. They acted as the custodians and are responsible for the ritual cleansing (Ikpu aru) of their parental homes. They perform purifications and reincarnation rituals for their

homes, other desecrated areas in the linage and even the birth rites of their off springs. These days, such acts no longer exist.

Before the advent of Christianity, no nwada (singular form of umuada) 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/her close relatives back to their paternal home for burial no matter the distance. Nowadays such practices have ceased to exist rather a nwada's corpse is taken to her father's house for a brief stop-over before being taken back to her husband's home for burial. It is expected that every nwada attends the burial of her relatives whether male or female except for the excused ones otherwise she will be fined.

Sources of Funding

Their major sources of fund are through levies and donations from good spirited members of the community. Some donations are also gotten from burial ceremonies especially from the burial ceremony of their deceased members. Some relatives, friends and other well-wishers of the deceased family also support the children by donating money to the group as the children and grandchildren 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 relatives, the money realized during the Umuada dance is shared amongst themselves without giving any to his immediate family of the deceased.

Umuada in the Present Days

This paper has discussed extensively the issue of Umuada Igbo in general. 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 organized themselves into Igbo life and culture with useful gender roles and identities for the development of their community, (Ilogu 1975). To this Ogbalu (1981) observed that the women as Umuada have done so much in their various towns, village and linages such that some of their activities have been highly appreciated while some are abhorred.

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 union's women's wings etc. which have some- what diluted the color 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 women's rights and experiences by collectively perpetuating the men's centered ideas. 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 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". However, there is still need for the Umuada union to still exist because in as much as some of their practices were abhorred,

most of those bad practices have stopped while the good practices are upheld. For instance, if the children of Umuada encounter difficulties, they and their families are welcomed in their mother's home/community as " Umu nwadiala'. They can stay for as long as they wish, and are encouraged and supported to return to their father's community as soon as conditions permit. This supports the Igbo saying thus; 'oso chuwa mmadu be nna ya, o gbalaa ikwu nne ya' which translates thus; 'when one is being chased in his father's house, one runs to one's mother's house'. At least, there, safety is guaranteed.

In a society where banking did not exist, the institution served the members in the words of Ogbalu (nd) 'as a bank for they continue to receive dividends each time a new member is admitted till their death". 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. However, new formations emerge in some urban cities/town and even in faraway places like America and Europe. Nowadays, the body seeks to elevate to national levels. The Umuada today is into micro credit-schemes to assist the women to set up small businesses to cater for themselves and families. They periodically arrange prayer sessions for the peace, unity and progress of their towns. Organize seminars and workshop to train women in some small scale businesses and health care needs especially in areas of family planning and in the prevention and control of deadly diseases.

They dialogue and suggest ways to ameliorate conflict resolution and mediation. They have helped to address the issues of greed, revenge, injustice and abuse of human dignity amongst themselves

and their late relatives' wives. They have in particular helped to prevent and eliminate violence and some wicked acts on widows there by making them feel relieved of the pain and burden inflicted on them 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 their towns in particular and Igbo people in general will not be plunged into the abyss of annihilation.

Umuada in *Adaeze*

In *Adaeze,* Nwadike gave a vivid illustration as well as a direct duty of Umuada. Just as earlier mentioned, umuada settle dispute in their birth places. For the fact that they are daughters of the land, they tend to respond quicker to problems in their fathers' land to avoid having a bigger problem. Nwadike tells a story of how Uzumma and Uchechukwu her husband lived a life of the man being the woman and the woman being the man. Uchechukwu, according to the author, was a drunk who wasted all his earnings on frivolities. He never cared for his family's upkeep neither did he care to train any of his children in school. He told his two sons that nobody trained him in school or anywhere rather he trained himself from the menial jobs he did as a young man. When asked for money to train his daughter Adaeze in school, he argued that she should go and get married instead. He believed that training a girl child in school was a waste of time and resources as the child would end up having only babies in a man's house and in extreme cases, elope with a man thereby rendering all her parent's spending on her in school useless. Nwadike (1998) puts it thus;

'Uchechukwu bu otu onye na ndi kwenyere na onye na-azu nwata nwaanyi n'uloakwukwo na-akwo aka o ga-eji etiri okuko aki'

(Uchechukwu is one of those people who believe that anybody who trains a girl child in school is wasting their time) p.31.

With this mindset, it was difficult to get Uchechukwu to change his mind towards his daughter's education. Uzumma, his wife, had hoped that her husband would change his mind in the future but she was wrong. The author explained thus;

'N'isi mbido, Uzumma chee na di ya na-egwu egwu, na e mechaa, o ga-agbanwe obi ya, mana mgbe o huru na ura kweere izu aghoola onwu, ya na uche huru' (initially, Uzumma thought her husband was joking, that he would change his mind later, but when she realized it was getting out of hand, she had a deep thought) p.30.

Just like it was mentioned earlier, a little problem will become a bigger one if left unattended to. Uzumma at this point, knew it was time to act fast. She knew her daughter's education was important and that it required huge resources yet she was willing to give it a trial. Nwadike wrote,

'N'ikpeazu, o chetara na Umunna bu ike. N'ihi ya, o kporo Umunne di ya ndi lupuru di n'ebe di iche iche ka ha bia soro ya kwurutu' (Eventually, she remembered that family is strength. So, she called her husband's sisters who were married in different places to come and intercede) p.30.
At this point, the woman was out if ideas. She felt, if her husband would not listen to her, he would listen to his sisters, the umuada. Moving further, the author wrote,

> Ndi di m, unu anwula. Eji m obi oma kpoo unu oku a, unu azakwa m ya otu ihu…ihe a bu izuuka abuo m bidoro riowa ya ka ada unu nwaanyi bu Adaeze bido akwukwo, mana o kweghi onu rute. Echekatala m ya bu ihe, ike agwu m. Ya ka m si ka m kpoo unu ka unu soro m juo ya ihe bu uche ya…' (my husbands, you are all welcome. I called you all with joy, and you all answered me immediately…it's been two weeks since I started begging him for your daughter, Adaeze to start schooling, but he refused. I am tired of thinking about it. That is why I have called you all to help me ask him what his thoughts are) p.30.

This is a typical example of the roles of umuada in Igbo families. They do not care in whose house they are called, what is important to them is that they have come to bring peace. Uzumma on her part, was smart in her presentation of her case. She did this by presenting Adaeze, her daughter, as a daughter too to the umuada and this gave the women a full sense of belonging. She made them understand that if Adaeze goes to school they will also benefit from it. After Uzumma had presented her case to the women, he husband still reiterated that he was least interested in training her daughter in school. The women had this to say,

> '… mata na e nwere ike, Adaeze a i na-aju na o gaghi agu akwukwo emechaa buru oji ezinaulo gi a… ha toro Uzumma na mgbali ya niile. Ha suru ya nkume n'obi ka o ziga Adaeze ulo akwukwo, kwe ya nkwa na ha aghaghi inyere ya aka…' (know that perhaps, this Adaeze you have refused to send to school may later become the pillar of this your family… they praised Uzumma for her efforts. They encouraged her to send Adaeze to school, and promised her that they will help her…) p.31.

These words of encouragement was all Uzumma needed to act as the author stated that prior to all these period, she had made up her mind to train her daughter with or without the help of her husband but she needed to make sure she exhausted all her options as she would not want to be blamed in future for going against her husband's wish. Though the Umuada did not give her money to support her immediately, but the words of encouragement she got from them was more than enough for her. Thereafter, she sent Adaeze to school and single handedly trained her in school. Eventually, true to the words of the Umuada, she became the pillar of the family, although her father was no longer alive to witness the remarkable turnaround, her mother lived to enjoy the fruits of her labor.

Maybe, if she had not invited them and laid the complaints to them, she would have not had enough courage to take the actions she took. Again, if she had gone ahead to do what she did, her husband would still have reported her to Umuada who will in turn ask her why she did what her husband did not support and this would have been a bigger problem for the woman.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The role of Umuada in the preservation and promotion of peace is a subject not to be neglected. With its great numerical strength, their presence, and strong networks at the villages, kindred and families, the Umuada 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 the very network that they use in achieving all the laudable aims and objectives of their projects.

The paper therefore recommends that Umuada should be encouraged, supported and allowed to exist. They should continue to mobilize women for the interest of unity, peace and progress of the town and families. 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 on the nation.

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