

ỤMUỌKPỤ: A TRADITIONAL INSTITUTION IN ACHI, ENUGU STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

The Ụmuọkpụ Igbo in Igbo cultural group is one of the most organized, peaceful and endowed women groups in Nigeria. It is also a recognition of the womanhood in the Igbo worldview. As individuals and as a group, the contributions of women as farmers, civil workers and managers of human welfare are central to the ability of households, communities and nation to tackle the challenges of poverty and conflicts. A society that ignores women or relegates them to the background does so at its peril. It is to be noted, however, that the Ụmuọkpụ Igbo like other women groups from other nations suffer from decreased access to resources and paternalistic domination. However, their traditional and modern contributions make them to be no “pushovers” in the political, economic, religious and social life of the nation. Their roles in these areas are acknowledged. Their developmental efforts are remarkable in the families, communities and the church. In families and communities, their reconciliatory roles are unsurpassed in support of their husbands, and the empowerment of rural women since they appreciate that empowerment is essential for a new world order and essential to finding solutions to many conflicts. To achieve this, an environment for peace has to be created. As an organized group, they have established goals and strategies to pursue peace. The research studied the roles Ụmuọkpụ as agents of reconciliation, social stability, moral and ethical orientation, and vanguards of development in pre-colonial and post-colonial modern Igbo land of Africa. Emile Durkheim’s social control theory is applied as a theoretical tool for the analysis. Secondary method, oral interviews, and person-to-person interaction were used.

Keywords: Ụmuọkpụ, Traditional Institution, Igbo Culture, Conflict Management, Traditional Values, Achi Town

1 Introduction

The Igbo in particular, just like their human counterparts in general, have always appreciated man’s existential challenges and have always provided for institutions to meet the various existential challenges. This belief in human beings’ capacity to solve problems that are human-caused and human-centered is a powerful example of humanism, or faith in people. The Igbo faith in the ability of human beings to manage conflicts leaves no human being behind irrespective of gender, age, background, status, or creed. Ifemesia (1981) corroborates this assertion when he says that the very survival of the Igbo, over the millennia, is that they (Igbo) have centered their affairs on human interest, and values that they have shown empathy, and consideration and compassion for human beings. The Igbo believe strongly that as long as one is a human being, he or she is expected to play an important and useful role in addressing conflict for a stable and harmonious society, and in promoting the social, economic and political as well as moral and religious-cum cultural heritage of the people. This is in keeping with the desired peace and security that is expected in communities; the Igbo are communal through and through. To be so communal requires social stability. According to Bell (1988), stability is in general a necessary condition for prosperity. At the same time stability guarantees progress. Bell (1988) connects progress with stability when he argued that progress and stability, far from being mutually exclusive, are complementary: progress without stability leads to chaos, while stability without progress leads to stagnation. Society needs both stability and progress; people like ships, he argued, need an anchor as well as a sail.

According to Nwala (1985), the Igbo form one of the three largest ethnic groups in Nigeria. Like their neighbours, they belong to the Negro race in Africa, and speak a language that belongs to the Kwa group of languages found in West and Central Africa. Their dialect is Igbo with many local dialects. The Igbo world-view (*weltanschauung*) is a complex of beliefs, habits, laws, customs and tradition of the people. This is what Nwala refers to as *Omenala (Omenani)*. According to him, *Omenala*, thus conceived, refers to what accords to the basic beliefs, ideas and morals without which, in fact, as the Igbo express it, the community would cease to exist because it must have lost touch with reality and the source of their existence. On the whole, *Omenala*, also a moral order, reflects a cosmic order because it reflects the body of beliefs and morals without which the community would mean nothing. In a world of wills and purposes, as is the case in traditional societies, order, which is a harmony among individual wills and purposes, becomes paramount. The Igbo ensure this order by various devices, and controls.

There are several institutions that are founded to intervene in matters capable of disturbing the peace and tranquility of communities; institutions that promote stability and progress among the Igbo in general and Achi people in particular. Some of the institutions include: *Umunna, Otu Umukpu, Otu Umuada, Umụ Okpara, Otu Ogbo, Ndi Nze, Oji Ofo, and Ndi Ozo*. These institutions are found in almost all Igbo communities, towns, villages and clans. They are agents of stability, harmony and conflict management and conflict resolution. They are to maintain the time-tested Igbo values, morals and norms that ensure and guarantee social harmony. Of the traditional institutions mentioned, *Otu Umukpu* has been singled out here for analysis and for discussion. Organized *Umukpu* is part of Universal Igbo culture that has been maintained by most Igbo towns and villages including the Igbo in the diaspora. One hears of *Otu Umukpu* in the United States of America, Canada, United Kingdom, Germany and South Africa. It has become one of the identifying marks of Igbo people and their culture, both home and abroad. Igbo society and culture, according to Afigbo, (1981) enjoy a basic uniformity of pattern and of cosmological and social ideas. For Hiebert (1975), culture is the integrated system of learned patterns of behavior, ideas and products characteristic of a society. Culture molds much of human behaviour, and individual variations are permitted and tolerated only within limits set by a society, taking cognizance of their culture. When we speak of culture, we refer to learned behaviour, passed on from generation to generation by nonhereditary means. Culture is a way of life of a human society. The emphasis here is civilized culture. Civilized culture is culture that promotes social harmony and cohesion. According to Bell (1988), a genuine and excellent culture can add immeasurably to the people's happiness, can improve progressively the standards which people apply quality of their life and can have a liberating effect on the people's ideas, tastes and attitudes.

In every typical Igbo community, *Umuada/Umukpu* society made up of women from the community but married to other places, is formidable. They are well respected in Igboland and nobody takes them for granted; no one can usurp their power. The opinions of *Umukpu* (also known as *Umuada*, in some clans) on traditional issues where sought, are highly regarded. They are always invited to intervene to resolve family/kindred issues in their maiden communities/families, even protracted ones. They wield enormous powers; they are dreaded by women married into their families and even their brothers also dread them. It is an age-long unique administrative institution in Igboland, whose opinions and actions are usually not ignored. They are seen and respected as peacemakers. They have carried on over the ages because they are also cautious of their role and the enormity of the burden they bear. And failure to do that which is right may spell doom, both to them and to their fatherland.

In the research paper however, emphasis is focused on the role of *Umukpu* in Igbo worldview, with special attention and particular reference to Achi. However, before directing our attention to the Achi people in the presentday Anambra State, Southeast Nigeria, it is pertinent to show meaning and understanding of the concept – *Umukpu*, including their role, relevance, usefulness, and imperative in the global Igbo worldview. May our attention be drawn to the fact that the compound words *Umụ-okpu and Umụ-ada* are synonymous and will be used interchangeably in the research. The reason is that they are from the same 'family', and the difference, if any, is not clear. Over the years, the two words have come to be used to mean the same thing for many people. For instance, both *Umụ-okpu and Umụ-ada* are daughters, women, and married. Of course being married means being given out to other villages since most Igbo people do not marry their sisters and brothers. By implication also they are mothers

and people of impeccable character and people who though married out to other villages, towns and class, still have the love of fatherland and the peace of family at heart.

In Igbo society, a woman is a daughter, a sister and a wife. Agbasiere (2000) states brilliantly that every adult Igbo woman represents a comprehensive nature of Igbo womanhood as viewed by tradition. To maintain their status, Igbo women organize themselves from the early stage for the work of motherhood. From the young age of ten to puberty, girls form *Ikpaohu* or *Enwe-oru* groups to assist in the farm. They take turn to farm for the family of a member till it goes round. They can be hired occasionally but the main purpose of the group is to contribute to the economic wellbeing of member families. This group of girls is part of the *Umuada*. The *Umuada* or *Umuokpu* (as it is called in some places) are the daughters of the lineage. *Umuada* is a compound noun 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 and means daughter. In general usage, every Igbo woman is "*ada*" and is recognized as such even in her matrimonial home. However, in a particular usage, *Ada* refers to the first female of a family called "*Adaobi*". *Umuada* connotes therefore, many daughters in a social group in same lineage: a social unit consisting of a group of people who can trace actual descent from one ancestor.

Ifemesia (1981) argues that with regard to women, all the daughters of the particular lineage constituted the *Umuada*. They sometimes acted together to end disputes among their local men folk; they collaborated to intervene and stop fights between the men of their natal and their marital homes; they had the duty of ceremonially cleansing the houses and compounds in preparation for certain festivals and celebrations; and they played a most essential and spectacular part in the funerals of their fellow-women. A wife, or senior wife, often acquired rights and privileges, and undertook obligations and responsibilities, parallel to those of her titled husband. She would assume a new name corresponding to his and, at times, would don insignia (such as ankle cords) like his own. One notices the enviable and important place and role of the *Umuokpu* in the scheme of Igbo worldview. That is why they are no pushovers. The stability of the village, clan, or town is largely their making. The fear of *Umuokpu* in Igboland is the beginning of harmony and stability.

2 Theoretical Framework

This research is anchored on Emile Durkheim's thought on the individual and society and social control mechanism (Cosser, 1977). Durkheim is a great sociologist of repute. His thoughts on society are apt. Durkheim argues that the nature of human beings requires that there be control mechanism to check possible excesses. According to him, men were created with unlimited desires such that the more one has the more he desires. It follows from this natural insatiability of human animal that his desires can only be held in check by external controls, that is, by societal control. Society imposes limits on human desires and constitutes a regulative force which must play the same role for moral needs which the organism plays for physical needs. According to him, in well regulated-societies, social controls set limits on individual propensities so that each in his sphere vaguely realizes the extreme limits set to his ambitions and aspires to nothing beyond. Thus, an end or goal is set to the passions. When social regulations break down, the controlling influence of society on individual propensities is no longer effective and individuals are left to their own devices. This will result to a state of affairs which Durkheim calls anomie, which according to him, is a condition of relative normlessness in a whole society or in some of its component groups.

3 Achi – A Historical Perspective

Achi, like any other clan, community, town, village, has a history. The Igbo do not quickly forget their history. The ancestors will be offended if a people forget their origin, their progenitor. It behooves us therefore to present Achi in historical perspective. That will enable us meet the people part of whose culture we are presenting.

Achi is a town located in Enugu State, in Southeastern Nigeria. Achi is the largest town in Oji River Local Government Area of Enugu State. Achi town is made up of 12 villages - "isiinaulo, isiinaagu" as the natives say. That phrase literally means that there are 6 villages in the northern section of the town and 6 villages in the southern section (if you imaginarily divide the town into two sections). Achi town is surrounded by some other towns: Isuochi (in Abia State), Inyi (also part of Oji River LGA of Enugu

State, Ugbo, and Mmaku (Awgu LGA of Enugu State) and some parts of Udi LGA of area of Enugu State. The most popular village at Achi is Isikwe. Isikwe comprises Umuakpu, Umuola, Obinagu, Abor and other minor villages. Umuakpu is termed 'Small London' because of its numerous modern buildings owned by its men and women mainly residing in Europe and United States of America. Umuakpu is noted for its production of doctors, nurses, pharmacists, economists, modern businessmen and other professionals. And also popular is Agbadala Achi with prominent sons and daughters. Large part of Achi is made up of sandy and loamy soil. Towns and communities are known for the cultivation of different crops including cashew trees, pineapples and mellon. These grow fairly well in Achi. Villages in Achi are: 1. Nkpokoro 2. Amankpunaṭo 3. Isikwe 4. Agbadala 5. Egwu 6. Ehuhe 7. Adu 8. Umumba (ogu) 9. Ihe 10. Amaetiti 11. ElugwuAkwu 12. Ahani

Achi people, right from the advent of Western education cherish knowledge and learning. In Achi, there are many primary schools, with a minimum of one in each of the twelve villages. The oldest secondary educational institutions in Achi are Corpus Christi College (founded in 1960) and Girls Secondary School (founded in 1962). Also found in Achi is Savory Memorial Seminary, an Anglican Seminary owned by Diocese of Oji-River, Anglican Communion. Another popular institution is the Achi Joint Hospital, which is a fairly old hospital. For several years it was and perhaps is still the best hospital in what used to be known as Awgu division in the then East Central State. There is a fairly old institution known as Achi Farm School (founded around 1960). The institution has for several years been training agricultural extension officers who are currently scattered all over eastern Nigeria.

3.1 *Umuokpu* Institution in Achi: Preserving Peace, Moral Norms and Traditional Values

Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2010) defines institution as a custom or tradition that has existed for a long time and is accepted as an important part of a particular society. This captures the institution of *Umuokpu* in Achi. It also underscores the very relevance of the institution. That also informs the reason the institution has remained, even surviving the colonial threat and the contemporary so-called civilization. The role *Umuokpu* institution plays in and among Achi people can therefore not to be overemphasized even as it is worthy of note. It must be said that at the front burner of the role of this traditional institution is the preservation of the ancient culture and tradition that have remained the 'moral policeman' of the towns and villages and of course the family, without which there would have been pollution, spiritual and physical capable of annihilating the human species. In playing their role, no area or mater is restricted. Whatever is capable of bringing destruction, now or in the future, whatever is abomination, must be fought head long and condemned in entirety. So, any role that preserves life and helps in keeping both the spiritual and the physical environment clean and unpolluted remains very imperative.

3.2 Moral Preserving Role

Bell (1988), has argued that without a sound moral basis, a society cannot be civilized. He maintains that both at personal and at communal levels, morality is the key. According to him, civic morality and personal morality are inseparable and indispensable. Without civic morality, communities perish; without personal morality their survival has no value. *Umuokpu* Achi have been in the vanguard of maintaining moral standards in Achi land. This has been carried out by constantly reminding the indigenes of the debt they owe to both the ancestors and humanity. This has also been brought to fruition by exposing and punishing those who have been found culpable. He said that the *Umuada* are more passionate and concerned about the peace, prosperity and future of their ancestral families, and are prepared to sacrifice anything for the good of the family unlike most women married into the same family. *Umuokpu*, as we have defined, are women who have been married out of their father's households, yet they carry along the love of the fathers wherever they go, not minding how comfortable they may be in their husband's homes. This is one way of showing gratitude. That is why they act as judges, moral instructors, conflict management agents, and even adjudicators, in matters that threaten the community. Not minding who is affected, not minding whose ox is gored; *Umuokpu* Achi has the traditional right to intervene in matters with the view to righting wrongs and bringing justice, equity and fairness to bear. They often intervene whenever the norms of the village were violated by any man or woman married from another village to their village and they impose sanctions on offenders. They

work very hard to prevent abomination or vices that are capable of bringing curse to the land. *Umuokpu* weighs the power of finality in issues concerning women in the family, community and in conflicts where men are unable to settle them.

3.3 *Umuokpu* Achi: Preserving Age-old Culture

In carrying out their ‘natural’ role, *Umuokpu* Achi have in no-holds-barred manner preserved their age-old culture. Africa has a very rich heritage of what past generations of African peoples thought, did, experienced and passed on to their children. This heritage forms a long line which links African forefathers with their descendants who now feel proud of it. *Umuokpu* institution is no doubt one of the cultural heritages to be proud of. The benefits of this culture can be seen in the several ways it has contributed in sanitizing the society.

3.4 *Umuokpu* Achi as Agents of Conflict Management

Umuokpu Achi, first and foremost are agents of conflict resolution. They work towards minimization of conflict and enthronement of peace in the family and community. Where men fail in conflict management, the *Umuokpu* steps in and achieves result. They are also known for weighing the big stick and their decision is final. Conflict is a clash of interests. Conflict is inevitable and can bring disaster to the family and community. The dysfunctions of conflict far outweigh the functions. In any conflict situation, women suffer more. It is for this reason they take interest in the resolution of conflict. *Umuokpu* Achi are known for doing this, and well too. They are aware of the natural causes of conflict; they however, have intervened when conflicts are at the breaking point, that point where dissension and resentment can be perpetual among brothers.

3.5 *Umuokpu* Achi: Ensuring that Wives respect their Husbands

Wives are expected to respect their husbands. They are also expected to respect the tradition of the land. But when wives become threat to the lives of their husband, or engage in acts capable of bringing dishonor to the land, *Umuokpu* are invited to arrest the drift. They meet to deliberate the issue and take decision. They can recommend and enforce any form of sanction which they believe is commensurate with the offence. They can even send such woman or any other woman trying to destroy their community packing without the husband’s authority. They play very strong role as the custodians of culture and tradition, peacemakers in their communities and role models as well as act as checks on the women married into their communities. On the other hand, they can also caution a husband who has been reported maltreating his wife. Yes, women, that is, wives are also human beings that must not also be maltreated.

3.6 *Umuokpu* Achi: Ensuring the rights of women

Women are human beings who deserve human rights protection. Often, the fundamental rights of women are under threat. In most climes, women are vulnerable to various abuses. Where women’s rights are abused or under the threat of being abused, it calls for concerned women to stop such acts capable of making women in particular suffer. One major concern of *Umuokpu* Achi association is to always ensure that women are protected from abuses within the limits of culture and cultural beliefs and practices. This is expected of the association since it is founded for the good of the people, women inclusive.

As an institution, *Umuokpu* Achi also protects the woman’s dignity and sanctity of both marriage and family life. Marriage and family life are respected in Achi clan. It is believed that a good home breeds a good society. For that reason, efforts must be made not to destroy the family arrangement. In that wise, the behaviour of women, especially where it concerns individual and civil morality are always the concerns of *Umuokpu*. They preside over residual issues such as abortion, infidelity, husband battering, husband snatching and enforcement of widowhood practices, and especially investigate cases where a widow is suspected of having a hand in the death of her husband, among others. Some of these are issues considered beneath men’s attention and properly within the purview of women because they have greater insights on them. Women accused of any of the abominable conducts above feel free to confess to fellow women who in any case, know how to probe and prod the accused than men. Yet, in the spirit

of protecting their dignity, *Ụmuokpu* may impose a sanction on an accused person without disclosing the sordid details of what actually transpired to the men folk to avoid stigmatization.

4 Summary

Ụmuokpu (*Ụmuada*) phenomenon is not restricted to the people of Achi alone. It is an all-Igbo cultural practice. Therefore, it is present in the seven Igbo speaking States of Anambra, Imo, Enugu, Ebonyi, Abia, Delta and Rivers. Igbo daughters in Diaspora are also involved. They are members of the laudable organization. There are *Ụmuokpu* organizations in London, England, United States of America, Germany, Canada, and several many places outside the shores of Igboland. The organization's interest is the peace and progress of Igbo families and homes. They play major role particularly when a married woman in their community is becoming so stubborn and destructive to the community. They will all gather and discuss the issue of the woman and take a decision on her. They can send such woman or any other woman trying to destroy their community packing without the husband's authority. However, they do not close their eyes when men and husband maltreat their wives, widows and girl children. Rights protection is not discriminatory. *Ụmuokpu* organization also play very strong role as the custodians of culture and tradition. They ensure that the culture of the land is maintained and passed on from generation to generation. They are also peacemakers in their communities where they belong. They are role models. They act as checks on the women married into their communities.

Ụmuokpu, however, have a restricted area of influence in communal matters. As an institution, it primarily seeks to protect the woman's dignity and sanctity of both marriage and family life. They preside over residual issues such as abortion, infidelity, husband battering, husband snatching and enforcement of widowhood practices, and especially investigate cases where a widow is suspected of having a hand in the death of her husband, among others. For the Igbo, custom and tradition are held in high esteem. Their value for tradition in real life is very important. The *Ụmuada* help to recertify that value for their tradition; development or modernization cannot stop or change the important roles they play in Igboland. Some may see it as olden days practice while others may see it as archaic, but no matter how archaic it may seem, the Igbo believe it is a warranty that depicts their value before the advent of the white man and it cannot be changed because it will amount to destroying Igboland without them. In every typical Igbo community, *Ụmuada/Ụmuokpu* are formidable. They are well respected in Igboland. Their opinions on traditional issues where sought, are highly regarded. They are always invited to intervene to resolve family/kindred issues in their maiden communities/families, even protracted ones. They wield enormous powers; they are dreaded by women married into their families and even their brothers also dread them. It is an age-long unique administrative institution in Igboland, whose opinions and actions are usually not ignored. They are seen and respected as peacemakers.

When there is peace and harmony in a society, development is guaranteed. When there is no peace, when conflict is allowed to fester, what one gets is what Thomas Hobbes referred to as 'state of nature'. For the reason that *Ụmuokpu* maintains peace and harmony, peace thrives and where peace thrives, men are able to think right and development is guaranteed.

5 Conclusion

Ụmuokpu institution in Igbo cultural milieu is one of the most organized, peaceful and endowed women groups in Igbo world view which underscores the enviable and high place on which the Igbo place their daughters in particular and women in general. As individuals and as a group, the contributions of these women groups variously as mothers, farmers, traders, sewing mistresses, public servants, lawyers, teachers, and managers of human welfare are central to the ability of households, communities and the nation at large to tackle the challenges of poverty, insecurity, and conflicts. It is to be noted, however, that the *Ụmuokpu Igbo*, just like other women groups from other nations, suffer from decreased access to resources and paternalistic domination. However, their traditional and modern contributions make them to be integral in the political, economic, religious and social life of the nation. Their roles in these areas are acknowledged. Their developmental efforts are remarkable in the families, communities and the religious places. In families and communities, their reconciliatory roles are unsurpassed in support of their husbands, and in the empowerment of rural women since they appreciate that empowerment is

essential to the survival of womanhood and for a new world order and system of things. To achieve this, an environment for moral firmament has to be created and sustained.

As an organized group, *Umuokpu* have established goals and strategies to pursue peace, security, tranquility and harmony in the villages where they were born and left to marry. The implication is that the *Umuokpu*, although they have been married out, they still have the love of their father's house at heart. *Umuokpu* is the moral conscience of the people. According to Bell (1988), without a sound moral basis, a society cannot be civilized. A society may have good laws, a just constitution, regular elections, well organized courts and an efficient structure of government and administration, but if it has a weak moral basis, the qualities of a civilized society will nevertheless elude it. A sound moral basis is needed, not only to provide the motive for introducing good laws and policies, but also to ensure that good laws and policies work well. Many reforms of the law and changes of policy depend only slightly, if at all, on moral considerations for their validity; but, as a matter of general principle, there is much truth in the observation that 'all reform except a moral one will prove unavailing'. A robust moral attitude on the part of a society's citizens is needed, if civilized reforms of law and policy are to be wisely chosen and given effect.

The study therefore recommends that the young girls and daughters of Achi and Igboland in general should be taught and exposed to the benefits of having *Umuokpu* in Igboland. This would however, ensure that the culture is retained and passed from generation to generation, while the benefits that *Umuokpu* brings would continue to be enjoyed.

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