

## **Women and Development in Africa: Urbanization and the Role of *Umuada* in Igboland, Southeast Nigeria**

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### **Abstract**

The effort toward overall development, unlike the narrower Eurocentric view of the concept, remains a major preoccupation of African countries and the developing world generally. In Africa, colonialism imposed the self-serving Western capitalist societies' view of development which revolves around the modernization theory on the people, without regard to existing differences in social and cultural values. Invariably, urbanization, provision of modern infrastructural facilities and the adoption of Western social habits became prominent parameters of measuring development. Unfortunately, these were restricted to the urban centers. Among the indigenous rural dwellers, the situation amounted to a deprivation of their rights to the good things of life and led to the migration of people from rural areas to the urban centers. This trend engendered changes, both in various aspects of the culture of Africa's indigenous peoples and in the developmental activities of notable cultural groups, including the *Umuada* (daughters of the lineage or community) among the Igbo of southeast Nigeria which is the case study in this paper. Within the pre-colonial Igbo society, *Umuada* were indispensable and complemented the men's efforts in the development of their various patrilineal communities. However, considering the debilitating effects of Western-influenced and male-dominated urban centers on the cultural practices of the people vis-à-vis the fact that the modern developmental roles of the *Umuada* in their rural communities are engineered mainly by their urban-based members, there are conjectures regarding the actual influence of urbanization on the group's efforts towards the development of their various communities. This paper seeks to outline the influence of urbanization and the notions of gender equality and "complementarity" on the group's developmental roles over time and the potentials of the *Umuada* groups as true partners in the efforts to extend development or the fundamental necessities of life to rural areas.

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### **Key words**

African women, development, urbanization, gender, *Umuada* Igbo

## Introduction

From all indications, the quest for overall development has remained a constant preoccupation for African countries right from the colonial period and was one of the major forces that propelled the nationalist struggles for independence (Amucheazi, 1980). However, the western idea of development (Willis, 2005), which was foisted on Africans during the colonial period made it *mandatory* for the colonized African societies, regardless of the obvious incongruent social and cultural values, to trail the same narrow western-oriented capitalist route to development. Even so, the accompanying modern infrastructural facilities and Western social habits as well as other benefits continued to be restricted to the urban centers even after the attainment of independence (Okoye, 2002; Ukwu, 1980). Combined with other factors, this widened the development gap between the urban and rural areas and led to a clamor for a reformist, more realistic, all-encompassing, multi-dimensional, and human-oriented view of the concept (Amucheazi, 1980, pp. 4-8) that would also incorporate local socio-cultural exigencies (Cowen & Shenton, 1995; Marana, 2010; UN, 2015).

Within the pre-colonial Igbo society in the present Nigeria, which is used in this study to showcase a variant of what obtains in African societies generally, *Umuada* (daughters of the lineage) complemented the efforts of the men in the overall development of their various natal communities (N. Otubo, personal communication, 8 January 2013). Interestingly, the development-oriented efforts of these daughters emanated from a specific socio-religious obligation to their natal communities. Considering the debilitating effects of the Western-influenced urban centers on the demography of the rural areas and the cultural practices of the people *vis-à-vis* the resilience of the *Umuada*'s development efforts, questions have continued to arise with regard to the exact impact of the urban centers on the existence and development-oriented obligations of these daughters, most of whom currently reside in the urban centers. This study, therefore, is an attempt to discern the exact influence of the modern urban centers on *Umuada*'s development efforts in Igboland over time.

The study used a historical descriptive and analytical method. It resulted from aspects of elaborate research into the peacebuilding and developmental roles of the *Umuada* groups in Igboland, Southeastern Nigeria. People of the Igbo ethnic group are found in about eight of the country's

thirty-six states and the *Umuada* tradition exists throughout Igboland. However, due to constraints on time and finances, the research population was restricted to the five southeastern states—Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo—which are dominated by the Igbo, unlike the Delta, Rivers, and Bayelsa states where the Igbo are in the minority. Both primary and secondary sources, gathered mainly from March to August 2011 and from August 2014 to January 2015, were utilized. The primary data consisted mainly of oral information from the survey respondents while the secondary data were sourced from books, journal articles, and reports obtained from libraries and the internet. The primary data-gathering instruments were first-hand oral interviews, focus group discussions and participant observation. Using the five core Igbo States as sample clusters, 50 knowledgeable male and female respondents (evenly drawn from the three constituent Senatorial zones of each state) were interviewed in each of the five states. Additionally, two focus group discussions with *Umuada* members were organized at Enugu and Owerri with discussants (20 in each case) evenly drawn from the old Enugu and Owerri provinces of Igboland respectively. The interview and discussion questions were structured to seek information about the influence of the urban centers on the developmental roles of the *Umuada* in Igboland during the pre-colonial (before 1900), colonial (1900–1960), and post-colonial (since 1960) periods in Nigeria.

Generally, the methods, instruments and techniques employed helped to ensure that the views of both the *Umuada* groups and other members of the society were adequately captured. The information obtained was subjected to critical analysis in order to achieve the research objective. Significantly, the outcome stands to help toward a better understanding of: The dynamics of the relationship between the urban centers and development efforts of these daughters; the all-inclusive notion of development; and how the *Umuada* groups can become true partners in the general efforts towards the extension of development and its attendant benefits to the rural areas. This is in addition to the possibility of replicating this indigenous gender-inclusive development ideology in other parts of Africa where the effective participation of women in the planning and implementation of development projects needs to be encouraged.

## Development, Women and Development, and Urbanization in Africa

As observed by Cowen and Shenton (1995), although “development has been called the central organizing concept of our time,” it “means different things to different people” (p. 1). They are of the view that “development can be autonomous, appropriate, gender-conscious, sustainable, or the opposite of all these and much else besides,” depending on the changing times and “geography,” among other factors (pp. 1–2). The situation has given rise to a plethora of definitions and explanations of development by various authors and reports (Escobar, 1995; Marana, 2010; World Bank, 2011) in order to rationalize different enabling principles and objectives.

Unlike the Western idea of development that draws from the modernization theory and its notion of equating development only with a rise in the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of a country (Willis, 2005), development is used here in its broader conceptualization as an all-inclusive and endogenous activity. This conforms with Galchu’s (2017) explanation that “development is equal to freedom of choice, opportunities on all essential issues like healthcare, education, nutrition, access to basic necessities and freedom of expressions [*sic*] and freedom from domination of all kinds, including tyrannical government and cultural imperialism through imposition of an alien culture or ways of life” (p. 68). This perception recognizes the economic, social, cultural, environmental and gender aspects of development as mutually reinforcing components of sustainable development (Kevane, 2004; Marana, 2010; UN, 2015; World Bank, 2011) and whose underestimation, regrettably, led to the failure of some previous development efforts (UN Women, 2015a; UN Women, 2015b; World Bank, 2011).

Most of the available literature (UN Women, 2015a; UN Women, 2015b; World Bank, 2011; UN, 1995; UNDP 2009) contends that even though women have been indispensable in the human and material development of their various communities and more so for the developing countries, their contributions are neither recognized nor adequately evaluated and compensated. Unfortunately, as Akachi Odoemene (2008) confirmed, “nowhere is this neglect or insensitivity more obviously the case than in Africa, where the political clout of African women has been overlooked, just as has their impact in their own society” (p. 13). The situation is worse for the rural-based women, the majority of whom are often and erroneously looked-down upon, even by their urban-based counterparts who

are presumed to be more enlightened or exposed to modern ways of life and are better remunerated (R. Okeke, personal communication, October 17, 2014).

Some writers and reports (Cornwall, 2005; Kevane, 2012; UN Women, 2015a; UN Women, 2015b; UNDP, 2009; World Bank, 2011) also approached the limitations of women in development strictly from the necessity of gender equality. As used in this study, gender is taken to mean “the social, behavioral, and cultural attributes, expectations, and norms associated with being a woman or a man” (World Bank, 2011, p. 4) while “gender equality,” as a precondition for sustainable people-centered development, is “the equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities of women and men and girls and boys” (UNDP, 2009, p. 24). The above-mentioned works have variously illustrated that enormous benefits are derivable from the provision of an enabling environment that could enhance the development potentials and prospects of both males and females. For instance, recognizing it as a core development objective, the 2012 *World Development Report* (World Bank, 2011) contends that gender equality “is smart economics” partly because by “leveling the playing field—where women and men have equal chances to become socially and politically active, make decisions, and shape policies,” gender equality “is likely to lead over time to more representative, and more inclusive, institutions and policy choices and thus to a better development path (p. 3). According to a UN report (UN Women, 2015a), “gender equality and the realization of women’s and girls’ human rights are fundamental for achieving human rights, peace and security, and sustainable development and must be central to the post-2015 development agenda” (pp. 6-7).

Different from the usual suggestions for the achievement of gender equality in development through women’s socio-economic empowerment, some other works have suggested the exigency of a change of approach and the adoption of ways of securing the cooperation of men (Cornwall, Edström, & Greig, 2011; Evans, 2015). According to Cornwall et al. (2011), instead of the long-held “representations of women and girls as heroines and victims and men as perpetrators” in gender and development discourse, there is need to reappraise the “normativities that structure the field of Gender and Development and that are manifested in policies and practices on gender equality, women’s empowerment and men’s engagement” (p.15). This is premised on the idea that “working with men to change the violent

norms of ‘traditional’ or ‘conventional’ masculinity opens up a space for mobilizing men to challenge the social, economic and political institutions that reproduce this violence from which they, too, suffer in so many ways” and ultimately helps in forging healthy cross-gender synergies for the attainment of gender equality in development (Cornwall et al., 2011, p. 16). The case of *Umuada* and development in Igboland which is the thrust of this study seems to have benefitted from this gender relations ideology. The resilience and successes of this age-long peacebuilding and development tradition may not be unconnected with the fact that it is not only rooted in the people’s culture and religious beliefs but is also accepted and protected by both males and females.

It has also been suggested that the solution to the problem of gender inequality in development lies in correcting the gender inequalities and insecurities that exist in the urban environments (Chant & Mcllwaine, 2016; Evans, 2017; UN Women, 2015a). The UN Women’s post-Beijing report (UN Women, 2015a) has noted that the “overall progress in the implementation of the Platform for Action has been particularly slow for women and girls who experience multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination” and that, among other indicators, “stark gaps exist for poor women and girls living in rural areas and in poor urban settlements [...]” (p. 10), especially in sub-Saharan Africa (p. 11). Similarly, Chant and Mcllwaine (2016) have drawn attention to how, as a result of the feminization of the urban slums and uneven urban conditions in the global South, poor living conditions have been exacerbating the existing gender inequalities created by cultural norms and customs. This is partly due to the fact that female urban dwellers are subjected to various discriminatory practices, including wide disparities in the employment ratio, lack of access to topflight jobs or business opportunities, and no right of ascent to top management positions. According to them, the situation is exacerbated for female migrants to the urban centers who usually suffer from inadequate support, various forms of stigmatization, isolation, harassment, and violence. It is against this background that the initial debilitating effect of the modern urban centers on the development efforts of the *Umuada* migrants can be properly contextualized. The experience was more humiliating for these Igbo daughters, especially during the colonial period in Nigeria (1900–1960), because they were accustomed to a culture of gender complementarity which, in turn, guaranteed a better level of equality with the men.

Regardless of the intellectual dialectics that go with attempts to define urbanization, it is used in this study as the emergence and growth of urban centers from where Western orientations and services drift to the countryside (Okoye, 2002). Although urban centers such as Onitsha, Asaba, Aboh, Oguta, Bende, Itu, Akwete, Awka, Nkwerre, Nri and Arochukwu, in Igboland, developed during the pre-colonial period, they differed from the *modern* or colonial ones in various ways. First, the traditional towns did not engender notable socio-cultural upheavals and reorientation due to the prevalence of cultural homogeneity within the entire Igbo territory (Okoye, 2002). Second, the demography of the traditional towns in Igboland was gender-balanced and even tilted in favor of females in some cases (Okoye, 2002). Third, the practice of gender complementarity pervaded the entire Igbo territory and socio-economic life and helped to sustain women's financial autonomy, respect, and rights in their dealings with men until the beginning of colonialism. In the traditional Igbo economy, women participated actively through trading, agriculture, and crafts, owned property, shared in the family's expenses, and could lend money to their husbands (Uchendu, 1995), or even "pay for titles on behalf of their husbands" (Uchendu, 2002, p. 77).

Conversely, the modern urban centers, for obvious reasons, pulled people from the rural areas, thereby disrupting the development of the Igbo traditional socio-political and economic setting (Okoye, 2002) which, according to Inya Eteng (2004), was intrinsically interwoven with the non-material elements of their culture in a way that satisfied the people's material, socio-psychological and spiritual needs. Similarly, unlike the fairly gender balanced population of the traditional urban towns, the male population of the colonial urban towns increased astronomically as a result of the colonial economic and administrative activities which made more use of men (Uchendu, 2002). According to Okoye (2002), even up to 1930, only the British-created urban centers like Enugu (9,412 males to 3,537 females) and Port Harcourt (9,264 males to 3,537 females) had higher male/female ratios, unlike the traditional ones that had balanced male/female ratios or a slightly higher female population, as in the case of Onitsha (8,827 males to 9,257 females).

Madhu Nagla (2008) and K. Ranjana (1989) have drawn attention to the role of increased male migration to the urban centers in the distortion of traditional family responsibilities and value especially the ability of the

women to contribute meaningfully to the development of their various communities. The situation may not be unconnected to the Western gender tradition during the period—the Victorian era—when women were not only relegated to the background and confined mainly to household chores but also deprived of most of their basic rights, including that of equality with the men (Buckner, 2005). In Igboland, the bases of the women's financial autonomy were equally eroded by the colonial economy which thrived on the production and export of cash crops as well as the influx of foreign alternatives to the locally produced crafts and consumables like salt. This was quite unlike what obtained during the pre-colonial period, when women played active complementary socio-political and economic roles in their various communities (Acholonu, 1993). While it is true that the male migrants maintained contact with and sent remittances to their wives, the remittances were not enough to replace what the women had lost, as some of these migrants were sometimes unemployed or poorly remunerated in the midst of the urban hardships, as Nagla (2008) observed. Besides, in their pursuit of enjoyment and frivolous urban lifestyles, some of the male migrants abandoned their family responsibilities.

In view of this situation, Gloria Chuku (2002) accused the colonial and neo-colonial structures and influences of imposing “inappropriate Western notions of family and gender roles on Africa” without considering the socio-political and economic structures that served women and for turning African women into “one of the most vulnerable social groups under the severe political, economic, social, health and environmental problems facing the continent,” thereby stifling their ability to contribute, as had been the case, toward the overall development of the continent (pp. 1–2). It is not out of order, therefore, to ascertain the exact effect of the urban centers on *Umuada's* development activities during the period.

### The Place of *Umuada* in Igboland

*Umuada* refers to women born in a particular town, married or unmarried, who trace their descent from the same patrilineal ancestors (Oreh, 1992). They exist in almost every part of Igboland and are regarded as holy, ethically sound, humble, but very powerful (Oreh, 1992). However, in view of the existence of different dialects of the Igbo language, the group is also known by other names. In parts of Igboland like Aguata,



Njikoka, Idemili, Nnewi, Okigwe, and Isuochi they are called *Umuokpu*. Among the Owerri people, *Umuada* are commonly referred to as *Ummgboto*.

The *Umuada* tradition originated from the Igbo traditional religious beliefs, specifically from the veneration of *Ala* (the Earth goddess), the symbol of fertility and giver of children and rich agricultural yields (B. Njoku, personal communication, June 25, 2011). Since women were deemed to occupy an important position in human procreation, according to the Igbo religious cosmology, the daughters were not only deemed to possess direct links with *Ala* but were also expected to live up to the wishes or attributes of *Ala*, by being upright, morally conscious, courageously truthful, and peace loving in order to be able to influence the actions of the deity in their natal communities, especially in favor of peace and success in life's endeavors (C. Obilor, personal communication, April 7, 2011). Prior to the spread of Western influences, at a certain stage in the life of the daughters, mostly before marriage, they were customarily initiated and made to enter into a contractual bond with *Ala* at the designated shrines of the deity (R. N. Okechukwu, personal communication, September 25, 2014). Since they derive their strength from the revered *Ala* Deity, the *Umuada* are bold, courageous, daring, and resolute and their decisions are deemed ethically sound and sacrosanct in matters that affect their natal, as opposed to the marital, communities. As E. Ikegbuna (personal communication, January 3, 2015) observed, members of their natal communities, regardless of age and status, tend to avoid incurring the wrath of the *Umuada* because they usually go to any length to ensure that the offender is adequately punished, hence the popular saying among the Igbo that "the fear of *Umuada* is the beginning of wisdom."

### **Pre-Colonial Community Development Roles of *Umuada* in Igboland**

Indeed, it would not be out of place to state that the *Umuada* were indispensable in the overall development of pre-colonial Igbo society. Not only were they responsible for the maintenance of relative peace and order, their moral crusade, economic development, social welfare, disciplinary, political advisory, and dispute resolution activities positively rubbed off on every aspect of people's lives and ultimately helped to ensure that their various communities remained on a steady path of sustainable development (A. Onwuchekwa, personal communication, October 13, 2014). This was all the

more so because of the fact that the socio-political, economic, and religious lives of the people were almost inseparable and were all anchored on the traditional belief system of the people during the period (Kalu, 2002).

Religiously, the *Umuada* constituted an indispensable link between humans and the supernatural beings, which accounts for their elevation to ritual elites in their various natal communities. Politically, the *Umuada* provided complementary governance structures by having representatives in the *Eze* or *Igwe's* (male ruler) Council, acting as advisers to the ruler/s and helping to check rulers' excesses (N. Ezekwe, personal communication, October 6, 2014; Amadiume, 1987; Anyanwu, 1993). According to P. Ihuoma (personal communication, October 17, 2014), although the traditional Igbo political system was dominated by men, the presence of the *Umuada* during important deliberations and occasions was deemed indispensable, since this conferred spiritual legitimacy or approval on the attendant decisions. As pressure groups, *Umuada* defended and championed the rights of the oppressed, especially in the face of arbitrary and obnoxious policies (Olisa, 2002; Van Allen, 1972). A respondent, G. Eneh (personal communication, September 30, 2014), narrated how the *Umuada* of a community were invited by some indigenes to look into the complaints against their *Eze* (King) who was in the habit of arbitrarily confiscating people's private lands. On an appointed day, the *Umuada* converged from their various marital communities, heard from the parties involved, and eventually advised the *Eze* to return the affected lands to their rightful owners. After the expiration of the deadline given to the ruler to comply, the *Umuada* converged on his compound, demanded that the *Eze* abdicate his throne, and threatened to embark on a naked parade unless the ruler complied with their directive. After several unsuccessful attempts to appease these daughters, the *Eze* finally agreed to step down in order to avert the calamities that usually follow such naked parades of the *Umuada*. The *Umuada* not only authorized the various lineage heads to start the process of selecting another *Eze* but also placed curses on whoever would recommend any member of the immediate past *Eze's* family to such positions of responsibility, and the curse remains in effect, even after more than a century.

Besides, *Umuada* were mostly noted for the maintenance of peace and justice as well as law enforcement in traditional Igbo society which lacked a police force in the modern sense (Omenka, 1993). They not only enforced their own rules/laws but also those enacted by their natal families,

kindred, villages and towns as well as the natural laws of the community, depending on the individual circumstances (M. Okere, personal communication, March 8, 2011). In the words of Eunice Odum (personal communication, May 12, 2011), “rather than physical force or strength, *Umuada* usually exert moral and spiritual force on the offenders and our tools of enforcement, depending on the situation, include imposition of fines, strikes and boycott of activities at their natal communities, sit-ins, ostracization and banishment of offenders, placement of curses on offenders, parading ourselves naked and joining forces with the women married into our natal communities (*Ndiomi Alualu* or *Alutaradi*), the age-grades and even the masquerades.” With regard to social control, they fought against any form of deviation from societal norms like laziness and unhygienic, unfriendly, immoral, and wayward attitudes. Angela Nwachukwu (personal communication, July 16, 2011) said that, “the Igbo society abhorred such morally and socially deviant acts like murder/manslaughter, stealing, rape, incest, desecration of traditional religious beliefs, places of worship and totems, and disrespect and maltreatment of aged members of the family/community.” Usually, the *Umuada* carried out these tasks with an unequalled air of authority and were not dissuaded by the age, gender, or social status of the moral and social deviants (C. Okwadigbo, personal communication, May 20, 2011; Van Allen, 1972).

The *Umuada* contributed immensely toward the overall socio-economic development of their natal communities. Such efforts manifested mainly in the provision of the welfare and security needs of their natal kinsmen which, in turn, ensured social stability and enhanced the peace-carrying capacity of the entire Igbo traditional socio-political set-up during the period. The *Umuada*, both individually and collectively, not only initiated and completed the execution of projects such as training their siblings, cleaning public places, and building family houses, community halls, stalls and related facilities, but also assisted in the completion of such projects initiated by their brothers. According to an informant, this was more so where such facilities were in dilapidated forms or non-existent, in the midst of socio-economic deprivations or natural disasters (J. C. Iwuoha, personal communication, June 15, 2011). In some Igbo communities, regardless of the financial wherewithal of their natal kinsmen, it was the traditional obligation of the married daughters to build and maintain the family chamber, *Obi*, a detached house usually sited at the entrance of the compound, which ex-

isted in every family and was used for important family gatherings and binding deliberations as well as for relaxation (V. Amaefule, personal communication, April 10, 2011). In trying to explain the link between the *Umuada* and the *Obi*, Veronica Amaefule (personal communication, April 10, 2011) further clarified that since people were expected to be truthful during deliberations, it became the norm for the *Umuada*, in their capacities as representatives of the powerful *Ala* Deity (Earth goddess) and as ritual elites, to take the responsibility of building and sanctifying the family chamber as well as the placement of curses on whoever would misrepresent the truth during such important deliberations in the family chamber.

Closely related to the above, the *Umuada* also engaged themselves in social work aimed at alleviating the plight of the aged, less privileged, disabled, and those who had encountered natural or man-made disasters. This took the forms of contribution of food items, provision of shelter, and farm labor. In those days when the daughters usually married or resided within close proximity to each other, it was common for the *Umuada* of a particular lineage to return *en masse* on an agreed date to assist particular individuals or families that were in dire need of such assistance. Even when it was not physically and materially possible for the *Umuada* to play such roles, especially the charity and humanitarian ones, they usually imposed a lot of pressure and ensured that their wealthier brothers helped those afflicted or less privileged. More than any other factor, this was instrumental in the non-existence of beggars in traditional Igbo society because it was a source of ridicule and derision to the families or units concerned (J. C. Iwuoha, personal communication, June 15, 2011). From all indications, such a practice would have formed the bedrock of a welfare plan in the polity but for the intrusion of colonialism.

In the area of human development, the *Umuada* played outstanding traditional roles, especially at the family level. They helped in the upbringing of their younger brothers and sisters. Some of them even took along one or more of their younger siblings to their marital homes where such siblings were trained in the desired occupations and assisted to get settled in life before returning home. Most of the female siblings in this category were known to have eventually gotten married in the course of sojourning with their married sisters. The efforts of the *Umuada* in this direction were more desirous in orphaned households or where one of the parents was deceased. In such situations, the eldest of the daughters were known to

have *fought* relentlessly to ensure that the younger siblings were catered for. Some of them married late or even refused to get married in order to adequately play parental roles or assist the surviving parent to train the younger children. It was also not out of place for some of them to marry very early to wealthy suitors for the main purpose of assisting their natal families, according to Alex Nworie (personal communication, August 24, 2012). These efforts by the *Umuada* helped in assuaging the feelings of socio-economic deprivation and hopelessness and ultimately assisted in the reduction of societal conflicts.

Generally, the community development roles of the *Umuada* were encouraged by some easily identifiable factors. The first was the traditional belief among the Igbo that marriage does not entail total separation between the daughters and their natal families, mainly for religious reasons (D. Emeka, personal communication, October 12, 2014). The second was that the well-being of and the prevalence of peace and unity in their various natal homes remained an important source of pride, respect, and integrity for the *Umuada* and this created potential security for them at their places of marriage, as observed by C. Anigbogu (personal communication, April 25, 2011). Lastly, the mere fact that most of the daughters married within the same geographical area during the period encouraged and facilitated the ability of the *Umuada* to effectively execute these obligations. In all, the socio-economic status of their husbands and children was a strong determining and encouraging factor in their development roles. However, even penury did not inhibit the determination and efforts of those unmarried, widowed, or indigent to live up to this socio-religious responsibility, especially in view of the benefits that could accrue (A. Orji, personal communication, December 18, 2014).

### **The Colonial and Post-colonial Influence of Urban Centers on the Development Roles of *Umuada***

From the research findings, there is no doubt that urban centers greatly influenced the developmental roles of the *Umuada* in Igboland. However, while some of the respondents were of the opinion that it affected the existence and activities of the *Umuada* adversely (F. Nwafor, personal communication, 6 October 2014), others maintained that urbanization greatly influenced their roles positively, even though it created some inhibiting chal-

lenges (E. Azu, personal communication, September 25, 2014). The findings reveal that from 1900, when colonial rule commenced in Nigeria to the last decade of the twentieth century, the negative effects of the urban centers on the development efforts of the *Umuada* in Igboland far outweighed the positive ones. Even the achievement of political independence in 1960 could not engender any appreciable change, as the Western-influenced urban structures and lifestyles, encouraged by neo-colonial sentiments, continued to hold sway. However, from the 1980s, as a result of cultural reawakening and the increasing amenability of the urban environments to gender equality and justice, the pendulum began to swing in favor of the development activities of the *Umuada*. In this way, the hitherto stifling urban centers eventually became the hub of *Umuada* efforts toward the development of their natal communities. This section is mainly concerned with the identification of the negative challenges posed by the *gender-unfriendly* urban environments during the earlier period (1900–1980s) and the positive effects of the later, more gender-equitable, period (from the 1980s).

Negatively, urbanization came with the expansion of the urban space and migration to the urban centers from the rural areas. Usually, the older *Umuada* transferred their knowledge and experience to the younger ones in order to ensure that the age-old tradition was sustained. Unfortunately, most of “the young suckers that will grow when the old banana tree dies,” as Chinua Achebe (1958, p. 46) would say, were lured to the urban centers. As observed by F. Nwafor (personal communication, October 6, 2014), the urban centers drastically reduced the group’s numerical and financial strength, and diffused their age-old spirit of solidarity (E. Odum, personal communication, May 12, 2011). Besides, as noted earlier, the overwhelming gender discriminations and inequities that prevailed in the urban centers (Chant & McIlwaine, 2016; Cornwall, 2005; Evans, 2015; Evans, 2017) during the period frustrated most of the migrant *Umuada* members and made it impossible for even those that had the desire to continue to observe the obligation to their natal communities.

Second, Western-influenced urban lifestyles hampered the spiritual or ideological basis of the community development efforts of the *Umuada* which revolves around truthfulness, selflessness, love, and sacrifice, as earlier pointed out. For instance, it has been the traditional duty of the *Umuada* to administer the widowhood rites to their late brothers' wives

(*Ndiomi Alualu* or *Alutaradi*) and to do so in an objective and diligent manner, in order not to incur the wrath of the gods. With the infiltration of new urban lifestyles, however, some of the *Umuada* began to dilute the spiritual exhortation and to be unduly influenced by family acrimonies into maltreating their brothers' widows in the name of traditional widowhood rites (C. Okonkwo, personal communication, December 24, 2014). Such deviations also manifested in the form of the pursuit of parochial material interests which usually attract disdain and condemnation from the other members of society. Catherine Okwadigbo (personal communication, May 20, 2011) lamented that, both directly and indirectly, these “incongruent and disorienting Western influences and attitudes also pushed some *Umuada* into prostitution in their bids to withstand the urban hardships and frustrations” and curtailed their ability to make peace and embark on development projects.

Third, the urban centers and the accompanying Western influences exposed many *Umuada* members to foreign gender ideologies and practices that were deemed culturally incompatible with what generally obtained in traditional Igbo society. Many of the rural-based respondents like Anthonia Ugwuja (personal communication, July 16, 2011) cited the issue of *gender equality* as an instance. It was rather difficult for the word *equality* to sink properly into the psyche of such respondents. While subscribing to the idea of fighting against harmful cultural practices against females and gender discrimination, the likes of R. N. Okechukwu (personal communication, September 25, 2014) maintained that fighting for equality with the men was confusing to them, usually sapped their energies and potentials, and tended to divert their attention from more important roles. According to her, “there are things the women can do better and there are things the men can do better.” As absurd as this may sound to core feminists, such expressed perceptions of *equality* emanated from the Igbo traditional gender worldview which tends towards gender *equity* and *complementarity*, rather than *equality*. Many of the very elderly survey respondents, like R. N. Okechukwu, Chioma Achonu, and Nkwo Ekeru, easily recalled that *Umuada* were better revered, had more potential, exercised more powers, and shared religious, political, and economic positions and duties with the men during the pre-colonial period.

Besides, the modern urban lifestyle led to the development of mutually antagonistic feelings and divisions between the rural-based *Umuada* groups

and their urban-based members (E. Odum, personal communication, May 12, 2011). As a result of the influence of new religious orientations and modern ‘civilizing’ trends, some of the urban-based members not only dissociated themselves from the group entirely but also canvassed for the discontinuance of the *Umuada* tradition since they erroneously deemed it archaic (E. Sokei, personal communication, December 5, 2014). This *ideological* dichotomy could be attributed to the fact that the Western-influenced feminism, which largely obtains in the modern urban settings emphasizes individual female autonomy while the traditional African feminist orientation has been more concerned with culturally-linked forms of public participation (Oluyemi-Kusa, 2006, p. 212), such as the *Umuada* gatherings.

In view of these and other factors, E. Odum (personal communication, May 12, 2011) stated that the last two decades of the twentieth century witnessed the degeneration of the respect for and development efforts of the *Umuada* to very low ebb. However, the tradition remained resilient as some members stood committed, courageous, daring, and resolute in matters that concerned their natal kinsmen (I. Mba, personal communication, March 25, 2011). As the very elderly members of the *Umuada* passed on, the baton fell to the younger, more educated, and mostly urban-based members who, having realized the group’s *raison d’être* and the gap created in the system by their many years of impassivity as well as the mutually reinforcing connection between gender equality and development, began to anchor the desired reforms in *Umuada*’s activities. While the *Umuada* groups maintained the enabling cultural links, they began to positively reposition themselves in line with the demands of the contemporary period.

First, the exposure to the urban centers and the attendant benefits enhanced *Umuada*’s ability to embark on greater community development roles. Around the end of the twentieth century, as if they were still being haunted by the spiritual community development obligations to their natal communities, the members began to embark on gigantic developmental projects like the building of hospitals, schools, civic centers, churches, craft learning centers, awarding of scholarships, and the provision of loan facilities to the less privileged in their natal communities (R. Mbagwu, personal communication, March 2, 2011). Ironically, most of the resources used in the implementation of such infrastructural, humanitarian, advocacy, and enlightenment projects were provided mainly by their members who resided in the very urban centers that initially *sought* to push the *Umuada* culture



into obsolescence (C. Egole, personal communication, April 24, 2011).

Second, it was their sojourn in the urban centers that led to the establishment of branches of *Umuada* meetings within and outside the country. In the course of better educational and job pursuits as well as marital relationships, some *Umuada* found themselves in the major cities in Nigeria and other parts of the world like North America, Europe, and Asia. However, the various rural communities remained the main loci of the *Umuada* groups. According to A. Aninago, the trend was sustained by “the belief that the attainment of success in our individual life endeavors depends on our ability to live up to the traditional socio-religious obligation to our places of birth” (personal communication, October 1, 2014). As Ann Nnabuife observed, this “enhanced the ability of the members to continue to encourage one another and to pull our resources together for the interest of ongoing projects in our natal communities” (personal communication, October 4, 2014).

Moreover, the urban lifestyle and its appurtenances directly influenced the commencement of the new trend whereby some *Umuada* groups started transforming into Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) with which they embarked on various developmental projects in their various natal communities. Such development projects included, among others, the building of schools, hospitals, churches, civic centers, community halls, and orphanages; electrification and water projects; welfare assistance for the aged, widows, orphans, and the less privileged (N. Aruocha, personal communication, March 27, 2011). By way of illustration, two of the modern *Umuada* groups—Umuada Ubakala Women in Charity and Umuada Igbo Nigeria and in the Diaspora—are worth mentioning.

Umuada Ubakala was formed in Lagos on July 16, 1989 and was formally inaugurated on August 31, 1990. Its formation marked the transformation of the hitherto traditional village-based *Umuokpu* (*Umuada*) Ubakala into a modern non-governmental organization. Unlike *Umuokpu* associations that were restricted by village boundaries, Umuada Ubakala Women in Charity went further to bring together the daughters of the entire Ubakala Clan who are married both within and outside the clan, regardless of their places of residence (Aruocha, 2009). On the other hand, the *Umuada* Igbo Nigeria and in Diaspora was formed in 1998 as a means of bringing together and transforming the various *Umuada* groups in Igboland into a larger network. From its headquarters at Enugu, *Umuada*

Igbo Nigeria and in Diaspora coordinates, in a federated manner, its members comprising Igbo daughters drawn from the five core Igbo states of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo States as well as those with sizeable Igbo-speaking populations such as the Delta and Rivers States. The group was “formed to organize and mobilize women in Nigeria to participate in the process of unity, peace-building, good governance, good health, advocacy on issues such as girl education, women and youth empowerment, cultural change, girl child and women inheritance, promotion of Igbo culture and other and other cultures development of Nigeria in general [sic]” (Umuada Igbo Nigeria and in the Diaspora, n.d., p. 2). Both organizations invested much in programs that are aimed at women’s empowerment, agricultural development, youth development, skills acquisition training, scholarships, rehabilitation of schools and hospitals, HIV screening and treatment, and peacebuilding. They also have branches in other states of Nigeria and in the developed countries of the world, especially Europe and North America, where some of their members reside, and the two have been partnering with international organizations and multinational corporations like the United Nations, Chevron and USAID.

### Conclusion

From the foregoing, it is obvious that the modern urban environments considerably influenced the development roles of the *Umuada* in Igboland in two major ways. The initial impact, though an indirect one, was detrimental to the survival of the group and the ability of the members to live up to their traditional development obligations. The concentration of infrastructural facilities at the urban centers during the colonial period eventually led to unbridled migration by women from the rural areas to the urban centers where the migrants were, directly and indirectly, influenced into abandoning the traditional ways which had previously sustained their complementary development roles in Igboland. However, the *Umuada* groups eventually realized the futility of abandoning their traditional obligations and, therefore, started renewing their *avowed* duty toward the development of their natal communities. In this new effort, the modern urban centers, especially as a result of increased gender equality drives aimed at improving the socio-economic condition of the female urban dwellers, turned out to be a blessing, as the economic opportunities offered by the urban centers

to the members of the group accounts for over ninety percent of the funds needed to support *Umuada's* bolstered interest in the current overall development of their rural communities. In other words, the improvement, or otherwise, in gender relations within the urban environments commensurately affects women's development potentials.

The new partnership between the *Umuada* groups and some international agencies and organizations in the promotion of overall rural development in Nigeria is significant in several ways. It points to the prospect of mutually beneficial partnerships that could exist between traditional institutions in Africa and international corporations and organizations for the attainment of the sustainable development of rural communities in Nigeria in particular and Africa generally. Moreover, it exemplifies the classic way in which traditional institutions could be adapted and harnessed into modern global institutions to meet contemporary development needs. Generally, the benefits of *Umuada's* successful efforts toward *reverting* to the pre-colonial Igbo gender complementarity culture in development, especially in ensuring that the fight for gender equality is sustained, can hardly be over-emphasized. Besides, even when it is considered that men also contribute towards the realization of most of *Umuada's* development projects through donations and endowments, the fact that the initiative, fund raising, and execution of the projects are done by the women basically helps toward the attainment of gender-friendly development in Igboland.

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