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## TOWARDS AN UNDERSTANDING OF UMUADA IN IGBO SOCIETY AS ACTIVE BEACONS OF PEACE AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

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### Abstract

*The Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria are characterized by a unique blend of patriarchal and republican principles, epitomized in the adage “Igbo e nwe eze” (the Igbo have no king). This phrase reflects their self-governance, yet it does not imply a society marked by lawlessness or a mere survival of the fittest. In traditional Igbo communities, various mechanisms are instituted to ensure that members adhere to established norms and values. The cultural and religious practices of the Igbo significantly influence their behaviours and foster peaceful coexistence. Actions that threaten social harmony or perpetuate oppression are vehemently rejected, while the promotion of peace and social justice is integral to their way of life. This is achieved through various institutions, such as the council of elders, masquerade cults, the Umuenna (extended family groups), age-grade associations, and the Umuada (daughters of the community). These groups play a pivotal role in maintaining social order within Igbo society. This paper seeks to illuminate the role of the Umuada as a women's institution of social control, functioning as vital advocates for peace and social justice. It raises critical questions: Who are the Umuada? What is their role within traditional Igbo society? In what ways do they act as prominent agents of peace and social justice in Igboland? To address these inquiries, the paper employs a historical descriptive analysis, utilizing secondary sources, including archives, journals, online articles, and various internet resources, to explore the origins and history of the Umuada. It aims to establish their essential position as primary proponents of peace and social justice within the Igbo community.*

**Keywords:** Umuada, Peace, Social justice, Republican society.

## Introduction:

Igbo traditional society is characterized by a notable patriarchal structure, where male supremacy predominates. However, it also embodies a distinctly republican ethos. This republican outlook is encapsulated in the adage "Igbo e nwe eze" (the Igbo have no king), which highlights the absence of a centralized authority typically found in other major ethnic groups, such as the Hausa and the Yoruba, where power is concentrated in individual leaders to uphold law and order. Despite the lack of a centralized authority, the Igbo traditional society does not descend into lawlessness or a mere survival of the fittest. This stability is attributed to the mechanisms established within the community to ensure conformity to societal norms and values.

While male-dominated institutions such as the council of elders and age-grade groups oversee the enactment and enforcement of laws, women also play a critical role in social control within Igbo society. Women in traditional Igbo culture exert significant influence over political, legal, and social matters. The Umuada, in particular, have historically been a formidable force in this regard, contributing valuable services to the political organization of the Igbo people (Nwoye et al., 2021). Long before the colonization of Africa, women were integral to the fabric of Igbo society, actively participating in political, traditional, and social issues. They wield their power through various means, including public demonstrations, collective strikes, acts of civil disobedience, ridicule, and even withholding domestic duties from their husbands. Their inherent vitality, courage, self-reliance, and organizational skills enable them to advocate for and protect their interests as members of the Umuada guild. Thus, women have historically served as primary peace-builders within the community.

The indispensable role of women in peace-making cannot be overstated, as they have consistently played a pivotal role in fostering peace within their communities. Historically, women have acted as vanguards of peace, often demonstrating courage and creativity in seeking alternatives to conflict and violence. Their unique position within society affords them greater opportunities to impart African values to future generations, as they maintain closer relationships with children compared to their male counterparts. Women are frequently viewed as the primary transmitters of cultural values, passing down these traditions through artistic forms such as song, dance, and folklore (Esin & Nwafor, 2024).

In conflict resolution, women often serve as intermediaries, conducting reconnaissance to explore pathways to peace and subsequently facilitating communication and negotiations. Furthermore, women are employed—or willingly offer themselves—as "bridge-builders" between adversarial communities, particularly through inter-community marriages. In such instances, a daughter is given in marriage to a son from a neighbouring community as a symbolic gesture of alliance and reconciliation (UNESCO, 2003). Women social positioning offers them distinct advantages in maintaining peace and stability within societies. Despite the often reductive stereotype of women as inherently pacific and paragons of virtue and tenderness, their roles as peacekeepers are deeply entrenched in socialization processes. These roles, shaped by societal expectations, portray women primarily as child-bearers, caregivers, and promoters of peace within the family and the broader community (UNESCO, 2003). Through these social functions, women emerge as crucial agents of peace in their communities, using their influence to foster

tranquillity both in their natal homes and marital households. Women advisory roles, particularly in counselling their brothers and husbands, further enhance communal harmony (Esin & Nwafor, 2024).

In traditional Igbo society, mechanisms that foster peace and justice are highly valued, and acts that threaten peace or propagate oppression are universally condemned. Various institutions, including the council of elders, the masquerade cult, the Umunna, age-grades, and the Umuada, have played vital roles in maintaining social order. This paper seeks to explore the Umuada as a distinct women's institution within Igbo society, examining its critical function in upholding peace and social justice. Central to this inquiry are the following questions: Who are the Umuada? What roles do they fulfil in Igbo society? How do they function as beacons of peace and justice in Igbo land? Utilizing a descriptive-analytical approach and drawing from secondary sources such as archival materials, journals, and online literature, this paper underscores the significant contributions of the Umuada in preserving social control and promoting justice in Igbo communities.

## Conceptualization of Umuada in Igboland

Historically, the Umuada has functioned as a vital platform for women to articulate their concerns, needs, and desires. This institution stands as a cornerstone of community life, acting as both an arbitration body and a force for de-escalation in conflicts, while fulfilling cultural roles that men cannot (Onyesoh, 2012). Ene (2007) observes that "Umuada are therefore a register of collective feminism through which Umunne and Umunna can symbolically form a binary human centre culturally and in solidarity" (p.5). The Umuada's close collaboration with patriarchal institutions and their occupation of key cultural roles have enabled them to adapt to societal changes while retaining significant agency and respect within their communities (Onyesoh, 2022).

The Umuada refers to the association of indigenous daughters within a given community. As a formidable institution, it holds power and decision-making authority, garnering respect from the king, his council, and the wider community (Onyesoh, 2012). Remarkably, the Umuada are granted privileges traditionally reserved for men, including the right to sit with the king's cabinet, convene community and kindred meetings, and participate in family decision-making processes, even after marrying outside their natal communities (Onyesoh, 2022). Umuada institutions are found throughout Igboland and are esteemed for their ethical integrity, humility, and power (Oreh, 1992). Given the linguistic diversity within Igbo society, this group is known by various names across regions. For instance, in areas such as Aguata, Njikoka, Idemili, Nnewi, Okigwe, and Isuochi, they are referred to as Umuokpu, while in Owerri they are known as Umungboto (Amaechi & Muoh, 2018). Linguistically, the term "Umuada" is derived from two Igbo words: "Umu," a plural form indicating many, and "Ada," which signifies daughter. While "Ada" generally refers to any Igbo woman in her marital home, in the context of the Umuada, it specifically denotes the first female child of a family. Therefore, "Umuada" collectively refers to many first daughters from a shared lineage (Onyesoh, 2022).

These lineage-based affiliations provide the Umuada with rights to land, property claims, mutual support for shared interests, and authority over others. Such privileges are accompanied by corresponding obligations within the community (Agbasiere,

2000). Notably, all daughters of a particular village, clan, or town—regardless of age, marital status, or life circumstances—enjoy equal rights within the Umuada (Maduagwu, 2012). This group is distinct from the "Ndinyom" (married wives) and holds a higher social status. Women who marry into a community must show deference to the Umuada, sometimes even surpassing the respect they show their husbands (Onyesoh, 2022). Madu (2015), as cited in Esin & Nwafor (2024), offers a comprehensive summary of the role of the Umuada in Igbo society, thus:

The Umuada is an association of daughters of a given community in Igboland. It is an association to which all daughters of a particular village, clan, or town, old and young; single or married; divorced or separated a member. Umuada simply means the daughters of a common male ancestor or "daughters of the soil". It is an absolute right of every daughter of a particular place, without exception whatsoever to belong to Otu Umuada, an association of the native daughters. As a group, Otu Umuada is a powerful sociopolitical setup in Igbo culture and a functional forum for females that work for the resolve of conflicts and maintaining peace in Igbo communities. Hence, women in the Igbo communities exert enormous powers by virtue of their position as daughters of the lineage. They are, therefore, recognized in all Igbo culture as judges, peace brokers and enforcers. When they rule on an issue the decision is final and must be obeyed by all (p.316).

### Origin of Umuada in Igbo land

The Umuada guild emerged from the collective assembly of married daughters of Igbo origin, who sought to form a unified body. Upon marriage, these women recognized the importance of creating a platform where they could gather periodically, not only to address mutual concerns but also to foster kinship and solidarity as sisters. This union was established as a rallying point for their collective interests and for the broader benefit of their communities. Since its inception, the Umuada guild has endured through generations and remains a significant institution today (Nwoye et al., 2021).

The tradition of the Umuada is deeply rooted in Igbo religious cosmology, particularly in the veneration of Ala, the Earth goddess, who symbolizes fertility and serves as the giver of children and agricultural abundance (Njoku, 2011, in Amaechi & Muoh, 2018). Women, being central to human procreation, were believed to hold a unique connection to Ala, and as such, were expected to embody the goddess's virtues. According to Igbo beliefs, daughters were tasked with upholding moral integrity, courage, truthfulness, and a love for peace, as these traits were considered essential in influencing Ala's favour within their natal communities, particularly in matters of peace and prosperity (Obilor, 2011, in Amaechi & Muoh, 2018).

Before the influence of Western traditions, it was customary for Igbo daughters, typically before marriage, to undergo initiation rites that solidified their covenant with Ala at the deity's designated shrines (Okechukwu, 2014, in Amaechi & Muoh, 2018). Drawing strength from their sacred bond with Ala, the Umuada are characterized by their boldness, courage, and resolute nature. Their decisions are regarded as ethically sound and are considered sacrosanct, particularly in matters concerning their natal communities. As Ikegbuna (2015) notes, members of their natal

communities—regardless of age or status—tend to avoid defying the Umuada, recognizing their determination to ensure justice is served. This has led to the popular Igbo saying, "The fear of Umuada is the beginning of wisdom" (p.93), underscoring the reverence and authority the Umuada command (Ikegbuna, 2015, cited in Amaechi & Muoh, 2018).

The Umuada typically hold official meetings five times a year (depending on the region), or more frequently if necessary, with additional gatherings such as the annual reunion. Meetings are convened on an as-needed basis, depending on the circumstances that arise. Leadership within the Umuada is usually drawn from the older members of the group, with selection based on qualities such as honesty, loyalty, and strong leadership abilities. Those chosen are deemed to possess extensive knowledge of the group's activities and are entrusted with guiding the group towards progress (Nwoye et al., 2021).

### The place of Umuada in Igboland

The significance of the Umuada in pre-colonial Igbo society cannot be overstated. Their influence extended far beyond their primary role in maintaining peace and order; they were integral to moral leadership, economic development, social welfare, discipline, political advisory, and dispute resolution. These multifaceted responsibilities impacted every aspect of life within their communities and contributed to the sustainable development of Igbo society (Onwuchekwa, 2014, in Amaechi & Muoh, 2018). The Umuada's authority was particularly pronounced due to the holistic nature of pre-colonial Igbo society, where socio-political, economic, and religious spheres were deeply intertwined, all anchored in the traditional belief systems of the time (Kalu, 2002).

Religiously, the Umuada served as crucial intermediaries between humans and the spiritual realm, which elevated them to the status of ritual elites within their natal communities. Their religious significance enhanced their social standing and ensured that they played a pivotal role in community rituals and ceremonies. Politically, the Umuada complemented male-dominated governance structures by providing advisory roles within the councils of Eze or Igwe (traditional male rulers), where they helped regulate the actions of the rulers and provided checks on potential excesses (Ezekwe, 2014, in Amaechi & Muoh, 2018; Amadiume, 1987; Anyanwu, 1993). As Amaechi and Muoh (2018) reference Ihuoma (2014), despite the male dominance in traditional Igbo politics, the presence of the Umuada during key deliberations and events was considered indispensable, as their involvement provided spiritual legitimacy and approval of decisions.

As a formidable pressure group, the Umuada were staunch defenders of the oppressed, particularly in cases where arbitrary or unjust policies were enacted (Olisa, 2002; Van Allen, 1972). Eneh (2014) recounts a notable instance in which the Umuada were summoned by community members to address grievances against their Eze, who was accused of arbitrarily seizing private lands. In response, the Umuada, gathering from their various marital communities, listened to all parties involved and issued a directive to the Eze, advising him to return the confiscated lands. When the ruler failed to comply within the stipulated time, the Umuada convened at his compound, demanding that he abdicate the throne and threatening to embark on a naked protest—a deeply symbolic and culturally significant act meant to invoke calamities. Fearing the consequences of such a protest, the Eze eventually stepped down. Following this, the Umuada authorized the community's



lineage heads to begin the process of selecting a new ruler. They also placed a curse on any individual who would nominate a member of the deposed ruler's family for positions of responsibility, a curse that remains in effect over a century later (Eneh, 2014, in Amaechi & Muoh, 2018).

The Umuada were primarily recognized for their role in maintaining peace, justice, and law enforcement within traditional Igbo society, which, in the absence of a modern police force, relied on alternative systems of social control (Omenka, 1993). Their authority extended beyond merely enforcing their own rules; they also upheld the laws of their natal kindreds, villages, and towns, as well as the natural laws governing the community, adjusting their approach based on specific circumstances (Okere, 2011, in Amaechi & Muoh, 2018). Odum (2011, in Amaechi & Muoh, 2018) emphasizes that rather than using physical force, the Umuada wielded moral and spiritual authority over offenders. Their methods of enforcement ranged from imposing fines and organizing strikes to engaging in boycotts, sit-ins, and even ostracism or banishment. In certain cases, they invoked curses or staged naked protests—an act of powerful cultural significance—while they sometimes collaborated with married women (Ndiomi Alualu or Alutaradi), age-grades, and even the local masquerades to enforce justice (p. 95).

In terms of social control, the Umuada played a vital role in curbing deviations from societal norms, particularly in matters of laziness, unhygienic behaviour, immoral conduct, and disrespectful attitudes. Nwachukwu (2011, in Amaechi & Muoh, 2018) notes that the Igbo society strongly condemned moral and social transgressions such as murder, theft, rape, incest, desecration of religious spaces and objects, and the maltreatment of the elderly (p. 95). The Umuada, exercising their authority without discrimination, were uncompromising in addressing deviance, regardless of the offender's age, gender, or social standing (Okwadigbo, 2011, in Amaechi & Muoh; Van Allen, 1972).

The Umuada also made substantial contributions to the socio-economic development of their natal communities, ensuring stability and enhancing the peace-maintaining mechanisms of the Igbo socio-political system. Their efforts in this regard were reflected in their focus on welfare and security, benefiting both their families and the wider community (Amaechi & Muoh, 2018). Individually and collectively, the Umuada initiated and completed numerous projects aimed at improving communal life. These projects included educating their siblings, maintaining public spaces, and constructing family homes, community halls, and market stalls. They also assisted in completing projects initiated by their brothers, particularly in instances where infrastructure had deteriorated or was lacking due to socio-economic challenges or natural disasters (Iwuoha, 2011, in Amaechi & Muoh, 2018).

Amaefule (2011, as cited in Amaechi & Muoh, 2018) notes that in some Igbo communities, it was traditionally the responsibility of married daughters, regardless of the financial standing of their natal families, to construct and maintain the family chamber known as the 'Obi'. The 'Obi', typically a detached structure situated at the entrance of the family compound, functioned as a key venue for family gatherings, important deliberations, and relaxation. Amaefule (2011) further elucidates the profound connection between the Umuada and the 'Obi', explaining that as representatives of the revered Ala deity, the Earth goddess, and in their capacity as ritual elites, the Umuada were entrusted with the construction and sanctification of the family chamber.

Additionally, they bore the responsibility of placing curses on individuals who might misrepresent the truth during critical family discussions held within the 'Obi'.

Beyond these ritualistic duties, the Umuada were actively engaged in social welfare initiatives aimed at supporting vulnerable individuals, including the elderly, the less privileged, the disabled, and those affected by natural or man-made disasters. Their contributions often included the provision of food, shelter, and labour. In earlier times, when daughters frequently married or resided near one another, it was common for the Umuada of a particular lineage to return en masse on a designated date to assist those in need (Amaechi & Muoh, 2018). Even in instances where the Umuada could not personally offer physical or material aid, they exerted substantial pressure on their wealthier brothers to extend support to those in distress. This tradition played a crucial role in the absence of beggars in traditional Igbo society, as having family members resort to begging was seen as a source of shame and social embarrassment (Iwuoha, 2011, as cited in Amaechi & Muoh, 2018). This practice could have laid the groundwork for a more formalized welfare system in Igbo society, had it not been disrupted by colonial interventions.

The Umuada also played an instrumental role in human development within their families. They were pivotal in the upbringing of their younger siblings, often taking them to their marital homes, where they were trained in various trades or occupations and supported until they achieved self-sufficiency. Many of the female siblings in these arrangements eventually found spouses while living with their married sisters (Amaechi & Muoh, 2018). These efforts were particularly significant in households where one or both parents were deceased. In such cases, the eldest daughter often took on the responsibility of ensuring that her younger siblings were properly cared for. Some Umuada delayed or even forsook marriage to fulfil parental duties or to assist a surviving parent in raising the younger children. It was also not uncommon for some to marry wealthy suitors early, with the primary aim of providing financial assistance to their natal families (Nworie, 2012, as cited in Amaechi & Muoh, 2018). These efforts by the Umuada helped mitigate feelings of socio-economic deprivation and hopelessness, contributing to the reduction of societal conflicts (Amaechi & Muoh, 2018).

Several key factors encouraged the community development roles of the Umuada in traditional Igbo society. The first was the Igbo belief that marriage did not signify a complete separation between daughters and their natal families, particularly due to religious considerations (Emeka, 2014, as cited in Amaechi & Muoh, 2018). Secondly, the well-being, peace, and unity of their natal homes remained a significant source of pride, respect, and integrity for the Umuada. As Anigbogu (2011, as cited in Amaechi & Muoh, 2018) observed, this sense of responsibility also provided potential security for the Umuada within their marital communities. Additionally, the fact that many of the daughters married within the same geographical area during this period further facilitated the effective execution of these roles. Importantly, the socio-economic status of the husbands and children of the Umuada was a significant factor in supporting and encouraging their development efforts. However, even financial hardship did not deter those who were unmarried, widowed, or indigent from fulfilling their socio-religious obligations, especially given the potential benefits that could result from their contributions (Orji, 2014, as cited in Amaechi & Muoh, 2018).

## Towards an Understanding of Umuada as beacons of peace and social justice in Igbo society.

In Igbo society, the authority of the Umuada is particularly prominent in conflict management and reconciliation, though their influence is generally limited in matters concerning land disputes (Obasi & Nnamani, 2015). While they may provide input on land-related issues, the final decisions typically rest with the male members of the community. However, exceptions to this norm exist in regions such as Ohafia and parts of Afikpo, where matrilineal customs afford the Umuada greater authority in such matters (Obasi & Nnamani, 2015). In the realm of chieftaincy, their involvement is similarly constrained, though some communities are considering altering these cultural norms to include women in the Igwe or Eze's cabinet (Obasi & Nnamani, 2015).

As active agents of peace and social justice, the Umuada step in to resolve even the most challenging conflicts. In managing conflicts, the Umuada employ two principal approaches (Obasi & Nnamani, 2015). The first is a conciliatory approach, wherein they facilitate dialogue between the conflicting parties, helping them interpret the issues at hand and explore potential pathways to an amicable resolution. Alternatively, when the conflict has deepened to a point of entrenched hatred and bitterness, the Umuada may adopt a more forceful approach. In such cases, they draw clear boundaries to prevent the escalation of animosity, and their decision on the matter is final. The forceful approach is not intended to suppress the conflict through power imbalance, but rather to assert the collective authority of the group. Importantly, before resorting to such measures, the Umuada exhausts every possible avenue for peaceful resolution, offering ample opportunities for the parties to reconcile (Obasi & Nnamani, 2015).

Njoku et al., (2019) identify several types of conflicts that the Umuada intervene in to restore harmony. These include (a) intra-family disputes that threaten the peace and solidarity of the family, its extended groups, the village, and the community; (b) boundary disputes arising from non-compliance with village or community norms; and (c) breaches of peace and customs. In cases of marital infidelity involving mothers-in-law and fathers-in-law, the Umuada often intervene, regardless of whether they have been formally invited. Their primary objective is to foster lasting peace, eliminate subjugation, and instil a spirit of metanoia, forgiveness, and justice among the parties involved (Obasi & Nnamani, 2015).

In these situations, the Umuada functions as a traditional justice mechanism that not only mediates but also engages in fact-finding and adjudication. They adopt a neutral stance as the conflicting parties are summoned to address the issues at hand (Obasi & Nnamani, 2015). Onyesoh (2022), citing Obasi & Nnamani (2015), reinforces the Umuada's role as beacons of peace and social justice, thus:

The Umuada will extract the facts, analyze them and decide on appropriate measures of penalty to be apportioned to the guilty party. Their decision is final on the matter. The Umuada can act as a "court of arbitration" (though not with legal force) and as a mediator in conflicts. They can ask the guilty party to pay a fine, cook a certain portion of the meal, or bring a cock, or ram, in addition to kola nuts for reconciliation.

Before this is done, guilt and pardon have been obtained and forgiveness accepted by the parties in the case. The person offended is expected to grant forgiveness to the offender and where there is recalcitrance from any of the parties, the Umuada will weigh the big stick on the latest offender. The male members of the same lineage as the disputing parties, along with the community, respect their roles as judges and enforcers, and their decisions are final (pp.148-149).

The Umuada have historically been recognized for their dignity, principles, strength, bravery, determination, courage, and unwavering commitment to the growth and maintenance of their communities. They stand out as a unique and highly esteemed social entity within Igbo society, embodying the qualities of fearless freedom fighters who refuse to tolerate injustice in any form. The Umuada have established forums for interaction among themselves, often designating specific rallying points where issues affecting their community can be discussed and addressed. In earlier times, the Umuada conducted their affairs without the benefit of written records, relying instead on collective agreements regarding their decisions (Nwoye et al., 2021). However, in contemporary society, a significant number of Umuada members are educated and have begun to formally document their activities. They have instituted by-laws that govern their operations, helping to minimize neglect and errors in their undertakings. Nwoye et al. (2021), referencing Njaka (1974), offer a compelling description of the powers of the Umuada, stating:

The Umuada do intrude in the affairs of the state and can impose sanctions which may include heavy fines, sit-ins, and other measures, certainly, the elders will go to great lengths to avoid a confrontation with the Umuada, this way, the women do, indirectly exert a strong influence on the affairs of the state (pp. 118-119).

Several historical examples highlight the significant functions of the Umuada in shaping Igbo society. According to Abamonye (1998), the Umuada have played a crucial role in the historical development of the Igbo people. In contemporary times, the Umuada have also influenced local politics, acting as "custodians of the constitutions," as described by Njaka. They are instrumental in resolving disputes among members, particularly within their families. In such situations, the male members (Umunna), as noted by Ene (2007, in Nwoye et al., 2021), often "take a back seat and abide by the rulings of Umuada" (p. 119). The Umuada confer significant rites during both joyful and sorrowful occasions, and they disapprove of their brothers seeking legal recourse through police or courts for family disputes. They believe that the resources spent on legal matters could be better utilized for the benefit of the family or community. Consequently, any brother who disobeys their guidance may be subjected to a monetary penalty and must withdraw the case from any external legal venue (Nwoye et al., 2021).

The importance of the Umuada in community life is indisputable. Ogbalu (n.d., as cited in Nwoye et al., 2021) affirms this by stating that the "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 regarding women to the governing authorities (Ozo na otu Nze na Ozo elders)" (p. 119). An illustrative example of their influence can be seen in the traditional mourning practices for widows, which the Umuada have historically overseen and regulated. The

primary concern of the Umuada is to ensure that peace prevails in their communities. They strive to foster harmony among their brothers, their wives, and children, ensuring that when they return from their husbands' places, they find their natal homes filled with happiness and well-being (Nwoye et al., 2021). Furthermore, Nwoye et al. (2021) highlight additional facets of their influence, noting:

Umuadas are sometimes strict but fair in their interventions and enforcement. 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 relatives to retrace from their bad behaviours. For example, if a man maltreats his wife and no one stops 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/laws are not kept as decided, they can ostracize their member who did not keep to their rules and regulations only to be readmitted if she shows signs of remorse and pays the necessary penalty meted to her for the offence committed (p.120).

As a collective, the Umuada embody decency and dynamism in their decision-making and actions. Renowned as effective arbiters, their unique position as women who have married into their husbands' families enables them to approach community issues with a certain detachment, allowing them to address matters without facing regular confrontations. This aligns with Isichei's assertion (1977, as cited in Nwoye et al., 2021) that the Umuada play a vital role in highlighting and confronting negative occurrences within their towns, villages, and families. They are especially entrusted with overseeing the affairs of women and ensuring that those who marry into their community from other areas adhere to local norms and customs.

In recent years, the Umuada have also assumed significant responsibilities during funerals. They return to their places of birth to mourn the deaths of their relatives and provide support during these rites. After the burial, they continue to honour the deceased by visiting their birthplaces, ensuring their presence is felt both at the burial site and in the deceased's family home (Nwoye et al., 2021). Traditionally, they would stay for three to four days, engaging in communal mourning activities. Nowadays, however, they often disperse immediately after the burial and return the next day to finalize any arrangements, while immediate family members of the deceased typically remain at home (Nwoye et al., 2021).

Following the burial of a "Nwaada" (a daughter) at her husband's home, her children usually visit the Umuada gathered at their mother's place, bringing food and drinks as a gesture of appreciation and to confirm their safe return home. This visit is known as "Unu narukwara?" which translates to "Did you return safely?" During funerals, a special dish known as "Ji oruru" or "Ji ofe mkpuru Ite" (yam porridge with fish) was traditionally prepared for the Umuada. This dish was served in a large basin, featuring whole tubers of yam and whole dried fish arranged on top, symbolizing abundance and respect. Such gatherings not only serve as moments of remembrance but also as opportunities for the

Umuada to resolve family disputes and reinforce community ties (Nwoye et al., 2021).

Historically, the Umuada wielded considerable power and instilled fear in their communities, often compelling men and even councils of elders to act against their preferences. Records suggest that if the Umuada felt severely wronged, they would sometimes visit the offender's compound in the nude, and in extreme cases, they might even defecate on the offender's property as a form of protest. However, such drastic measures have largely disappeared in contemporary times. Today, the Umuada functions as a vital component of checks and balances within socio-political organizations, ensuring that actions align with principles of social justice and fairness within the community (Nwoye et al., 2021).

In the context of marriage, the Umuada play a significant role, particularly in traditional marriages. They often act as intermediaries, guiding potential suitors from their husbands' communities toward suitable brides from their native communities. This matchmaking is accompanied by advisory roles, where the Umuada counsel the Eze (king or chief) of their community, especially if they perceive any negligence in fulfilling civic duties toward their subjects.

Additionally, the Umuada engage in various developmental projects within their birthplaces, sometimes even constructing physical structures that can generate income for them (Nwoye et al., 2021). They enforce disciplinary measures against women who violate community norms, with sanctions ranging from property confiscation to social isolation. Traditionally, as mothers, sisters, wives, and widows, the Umuada were called upon to adjudicate matters regarding the ownership of economic trees and delineate land boundaries in disputes. As daughters of the soil, they have played an essential role in arbitrating disputes within their paternal homes, thereby exerting significant influence over community matters. They actively participate in group politics, as Isichei (1977, as cited in Nwoye et al., 2021) notes, they support the decisions made by village assemblies, recognizing the impact of women's support on the overall governance of the town. This dynamic illustrates the enduring legacy and evolving influence of the Umuada in promoting social cohesion and justice within their communities.

A notable instance showcasing the Umuada's proactive approach occurred in an Igbo town when a chief priest of one of the local shrines was murdered. In response to this heinous act, the Umuada mobilized en masse for two consecutive days to protest against the injustice. They knelt in prayer and circled the entire town, seeking divine intervention. On the second day of their demonstration, they occupied the floor of the Eze's palace from dawn until dusk, expressing their sorrow and demanding that the Eze and his cabinet take decisive action to identify and apprehend those responsible for the crime (Nwoye et al., 2021). During this period, the Umuada also engaged in fasting. Their relentless efforts culminated in negotiations that ultimately reconciled the community of the murdered chief priest with the one where he had been killed. Importantly, the Umuada's actions led to the apprehension of suspects who were not indigenes of the community, thereby sparing innocent local residents—who were also relatives of the Umuada—from wrongful arrest while allowing the true culprits to face justice. This incident illustrates the critical role of the Umuada in safeguarding their community against injustice (Nwoye et al., 2021).



Historically, the Umuada have also been responsible for making sacrifices aimed at ensuring the peace and prosperity of their towns. They acted as custodians of ritual practices, overseeing ritual cleansing (Ikpu aru) of their ancestral homes. This involved performing purification and reincarnation rituals, as well as conducting birth rites for their offspring and cleansing desecrated sites within their lineage. However, such practices have largely faded from contemporary society (Nwoye et al., 2021). In summary, the Umuada fulfil a multitude of roles in society, serving as leaders, peace builders, developers, economic contributors, and mothers. Their prominence as peacemakers and advocates for justice is so pronounced that any family, community, or clan facing intractable conflicts often turns to the Umuada for resolution. In many instances, they succeed in restoring harmony (Church-Hill & Ibiene, 2020). The diverse roles of the Umuada in promoting peace and social justice can be seen in how they address various issues within the community, including:

- Settlement of disputes among women.
- Addressing marital infidelity.
- Responding to assaults on wives by their husbands.
- Managing conflicts involving physical altercations between parties (Amolo, 2019).

This multifaceted approach is further corroborated by Church-Hill and Ibiene (2020), who cite Onuoha (1999) in highlighting the Umuada's integral role in fostering peace and justice within their communities, thus:

The Umuada association ensures that peace and justice are maintained in the traditional community. The Umuada settle disputes that arise between husbands and their wives, they also promote the stability of their community. The Umuada ensure that sanity, fair play, peace and justice reign in their natal homes. An interesting remark about the Umuada is that they are never partial in their judgment.

The role of the Umuada as pivotal agents of peace and social justice is further exemplified in the accounts of various historical conflicts and resolutions. For instance, Ogbuehi (2019) recounts how the Umuada successfully mediated a protracted land dispute between the Umunebo and Umuokuzu communities in the Owerri Local Government Area. Similarly, the Umuada of Aguleri and Umuleri in Anambra State played a crucial role in restoring peace between these warring communities, which resulted in significant loss of life.

In the Nkanu East Local Government Area of Enugu State, women have also been instrumental in resolving conflicts that have engulfed the region. Afigbo (1981) highlights the Umuada's unique approach to peace building, noting that they would carry green leaves or folded palm fronds to the battlefield, symbols of peace, as they marched to the conflict zone. Accompanying their physical presence were songs emphasizing the perils of war and the urgent need for peace, which often resonated emotionally with the opposing parties and inspired them to consider reconciliation. Should their interventions be ignored, the Umuada risk incurring the wrath of Ala, the earth goddess, by endangering their daughters—a violation that is considered taboo. This cultural context reinforces the significance of their role in mediating peace, as their moral authority is seldom questioned within the community. According to Nmah (2003), when the Umuada render

decisions on matters, those rulings are final and must be adhered to by all.

The Umuada wield remarkable influence in their natal homes as peace builders, often more so than in their marital homes. This is largely due to the immunity they enjoy as autochthons—daughters of the soil—contrasting with the status of wives, who are often regarded as outsiders or foreigners to their husband's clans and communities (Nwoye, 2015). This dynamic underscores the Umuada's unique position and authority in conflict resolution and social justice within their communities.

## Critical Evaluation and Conclusion

A panoramic view of the Umuada in Igbo society points out the fact that the group wields an overwhelming degree of relevance and influence in the community. They have enormous power within the Igbo society. Although this power has been utilized positively to contribute significantly to peace and social justice in the different Igbo communities, just like every institution that wields excessive power, it has often been used vindictively by the group. Onyesoh (2022) affirms this fact, noting that the dominant status of the Umuada also allows them to persecute and take oppressive action against women in weaker positions. In her words:

The Umuada at times align with the Ndinyom, especially at the funeral of one of their brothers. If it comes to light that the widow of the dead man had maltreated him when he was still alive, the Umuada will not make it easy for the widow. Some families force women to mourn their late husbands for up to a year instead of the normal six months. This happens especially when the wife is at loggerheads with the Umuada, and they use the period of mourning to victimise the woman. In this regard, the Umuada can also act as a conflict driver within the community. Women sometimes use the powers of their institution excessively (145).

Situations like the above belie the position of the Umuada as active beacons of peace and social justice. It is essential to recognize that with the rise of modernity and the emergence of ideological movements, particularly the feminist movement advocating for women's rights and equality, the Umuada group within Igbo society does not align itself as either an ideological or feminist entity. The concept of Umuada predates the contemporary feminist movement. While Igbo culture, like many indigenous cultures, is inherently patriarchal, this does not necessarily imply the subjugation of women (Obasi & Nnamani, 2015). Women in traditional Igbo society exert significant influence across political, legal, religious, and social spheres (Nwokafor, 2012). They have historically established various forums aimed at promoting and safeguarding their interests, with Umuada being a prominent example.

Obasi and Nnamani (2015) contend that although the term "feminism" is rooted in the mobilization for women's suffrage in Europe and America during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the quest for justice for women extends beyond this specific period of activism. The Umuada's advocacy for justice predates this time frame; their efforts manifest not in episodic "waves" but as a continuous struggle for empowerment and equitable opportunities for women. Consequently, the Umuada does not position itself in opposition to men. As a socio-cultural group, they acknowledge and respect the rights and authority of men, while seeking

reciprocal recognition of their rights and power. They possess a nuanced understanding of their strengths and limitations (Amadi, 1982). Obasi and Nnamani (2015) further support this perspective, asserting that:

Operating within the structures of modernity, the Umuada respects tradition, but does not, as a feminine power group, seek to compete with the men as heads of the family. While every other women group in other tribes seeks to push the boundaries of femininity by attacking distributed family roles under the guise of modernity, the Umuada remains unaffected by modern developments that seek to misinterpret women's basic functions as bridge builders, mediators and conflict managers in family and communal issues (263)

Consequently, the Umuada, in contrast to feminists who primarily advocate for gender equality, are more oriented towards equity. Their primary focus is not the pursuit of equality; rather, they convene out of a sense of love, shared responsibilities, equal opportunities, and a genuine concern for their community. They unite to advocate for developmental support and to ensure equitable participation in fostering peace through their mediatory roles (Obasi & Nnamani, 2015).

Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that although the Umuada historically wielded significant power within Igbo society and were regarded as beacons of peace and social justice, this status has diminished considerably in contemporary Igbo society. As noted by Amaechi and Muoh (2018), the forces of modernization, urbanization, and Western lifestyles have negatively impacted the fundamental values that the Umuada once embodied. Drawing on insights from a personal interview with C. Okonkwo (2014), they observed that:

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 objectively and diligently, 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 (pp.98-99).

Ultimately, the Umuada serves as the foremost collective uniting all women within Igbo society. They are instrumental in conflict resolution and management at various levels, particularly concerning issues that impact women in the community. Various organizations, including market women associations, social clubs, and dance groups, act as custodians of public morality and social harmony. However, the Umuada surpasses these different women groups, both traditional and modern. Although men predominantly dominate socio-political matters in Igbo land, women play a significant role in mediating complex conjugal conflicts, often stepping in as mediators when such disputes arise. In these contexts, men typically yield to the authority of the Umuada (Obasi & Nnamani, 2015). As a result, the Umuada have successfully

leveraged this influence to actively foster a peaceful and just society.

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