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***Umuada* and the Phenomenon of Dual Identity in  
Ogbaruland**

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**Abstract**

*The Igbo is a patriarchal society but despite this, the association of indigenous women of some Igbo communities known as Umuada continues to exert influence in their patrilineal homes even after the exchange of identity through marriage; and despite their new roles as ndiomu (association of wives) in their consanguine communities. This results in a phenomenon of dual identity, significantly different from parallel Igbo sub-cultural groups. Several studies have been carried out on the contribution of the Umuada to their communities, especially in the economic and social spheres. However, there is a dearth of information on the formal structure of authority within which women carry out these activities especially in relation to their*

*identities. This study examines the motivation for this recognition of the woman in a patriarchal culture and the patriarchal agenda is examined. Information on the role of women in indigenous and contemporary Igbo society is provided and findings reveal the dual identity of women in this region and the implications for intra-communal relation dynamics.*

**Key Words:** Igbo, Ogbaru, Umuada, Identity

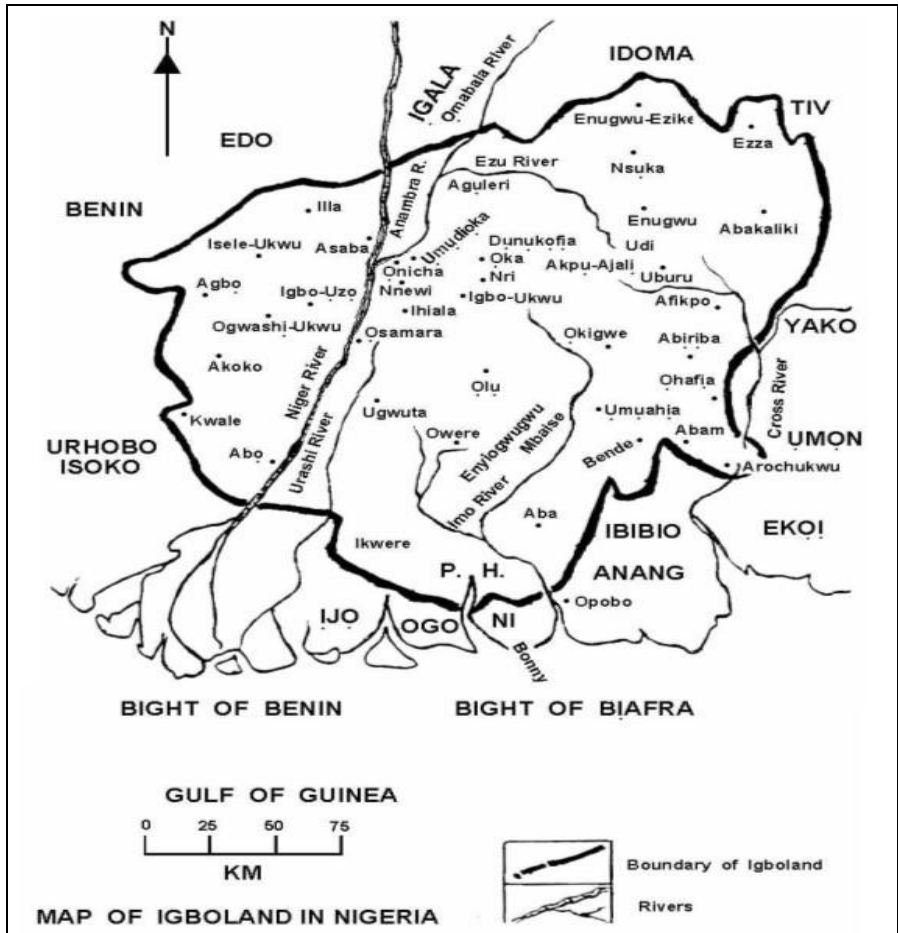
### Introduction

This is a study of the role of women in Igbo Society, using the Ogbaru Riverrine Igbo as a model. Specifically, it focuses on the association of indigenous women of Igbo communities known as the *Umuada*. The Ogbaru Igbo group, here studied, reside on the River Niger banks between Onitsha and the Niger delta. Some of the major riverrine towns in this region (known as *Ogbaru*) are Ndoni (in present day Bayelsa), Ochuche, Ogwu, Ogbakuba, Odekpe, and Osomala (in present day Anambra) on the Eastern bank; and Okoh and Utchi (in present day delta state), on the western bank. These riverrine towns share a common culture and similar life style influenced by their shared dependence on the River Niger. Not surprisingly, they are united by beliefs and world views which have emerged into a lifestyle and philosophy known as Ogbaru culture.

Present day Ogbaru society, as an offshoot of the wider Igbo nation, is what may be regarded as a 'transitional society'; a society refashioned to a large extent by attitudes formed by association with external influences and variables which are evident in the group as a whole. These influences have mostly come from outside Igboland and include the slave trade, colonization, and the amalgamation of present Northern and Southern Nigeria in 1914 by the British colonial administration. Others include external economic and social relations (trade, missionaries, and education), the First and Second World Wars, Independence and the Nigeria-Biafra civil wars. Contemporary *Ogbaru* society is a transitional one in the above sense.

Today, the *Ogbaru* is dispersed in at least four states as minorities within the larger groups. This fragmentation is a major cause of the dilution of cultural identity which is subsequently leading to the extinction of cultural consciousness in smaller groups and absorption into larger ones. Cultural boundaries are often vandalized thereby bringing about the erosion of uniting elements. Information on the role of the woman in this culture is one of the issues at risk of extinction in the new dispensation although research has

been carried out on the contribution of women in Nigerian society as agents of communal stability (Awe, 1989; Achebe, 2004; Fawole, 2002; Akinrinmade, 2009).



**Fig. 1: Map of Igboland**

The role of the *umuada*, the association of indigenous women in Igboland has been studied (Njaka, 1987; Achebe, 2004; Korieh, 2010) yet there exists a gap in the documentation of the religious role played by patrilineally born,

indigenous women in Ogbaru and which is predicated on the duality of their identity. This is important because of the unusual phenomenon of dual identity which distinguish the women of this region from their ethnic counterparts and which forms the basis of the influence they exert in their communities. Therefore, this paper focuses on a system in which women retained their patrilineal, affine identity while simultaneously assuming membership of the consanguine community; and the implication of the roles for the communities arising from this duality of identity.

The overall objective of the study is:

- To elucidate the phenomenon of the dual identity of *Umuada* as the intrinsic basis of their influence in their communities.

The specific objectives are to examine:

- the importance of the *umuada* as religious agents in their parent communities and
- the role of the *umuada* in the intra-communal relation dynamics in the region.

The research on African cultural phenomena from an insider's perspective is a focal issue in contemporary scholarship, and research energy is directed to the reconstruction of biased information of colonial documentation. The effort at information gathering on the Igbo woman is relatively slow and inadequate. As Achebe (2004) remarks in an interview, no mention of the role of the woman is made in the historical documents of post-colonial Igbo land, and it was in her line of research as an oral historian that she stumbled on the information about the only female paramount chief of colonial administration in the entire country, who hailed from Igboland. Therefore, more needs to be done to fill the gap on information about the Igbo woman in the indigenous and present transitional society.

Again, consequent to the continuous creation of states in Nigeria, fragmentation of communities is ongoing and one of the casualties of the exercise is the Ogbaru speaking Igbo people of the river rine region of Eastern Nigeria, a group which is bound by common historical antecedence, cultural practices, customs and dialect. However, at the commencement of this research, at least three *Ogbaru* towns were to be found in three different states, where they are subsumed within the larger dialectally autonomous groups. Specifically, the Ogbaru town of Oguta is now located in Imo state,

the town of Aboh in Delta State, Ndoni in Rivers State and Osomala town, (the model for this seminar) is currently located in Anambra state. Customs and traditions of the minority often cannot hold out in this atmosphere and distortion and extinction follow inevitably. The Ogbaru group is traditionally a cluster of fishing, with a subsistent and agrarian economy. The Ogbaru region was prominent during the period of Industrial Revolution which depended on the oil palm for which this region is known. The kingdom of Osomala and Aboh rose into prominence during this period. Today, there are new economic sources which have evolved from changes, both political and social. Of particular importance are the creation of states and the coming of oil drilling activities to the lower River Niger communities of South- Eastern Nigeria.

### **Methodology**

Data was collected for the study employing the following methods:

- (1) Library and internet search;
- (2) Focus group discussions and interviews with key informants;
- (3) Observation of the phenomena;
- (4) Live and still photographs

This involved visits to various libraries and internet search on the subject under review. Field-work involved contacts with village elders and focus group discussions with the elders of Osomala and Odeke in Anambra State, and Okoh in Delta State. As titled elders, who are respected for their knowledge of oral tradition, the interviews with these elders provided invaluable background knowledge on the subject. In particular, the information gleaned from these elders proved to be useful as a source of oral tradition for the foreground of the study.

The theoretical approach of the work is based on the gender theory of Womanism, a species of feminist ideology which is compatible with the social realities of the woman in Africa as a unique cultural environment. In addition, the theory of Symbolic Interactionism is employed because the subject embraces gender construction, using symbolic modes in the analyses of content and practice.

### **The Search for Regional Gender Ideologies**

Gender has been variously defined as a practice organized in terms of the relative reproductive division of people into male and female (Connell 1987). As a concept, gender is based on assumptions about capability determined by sexual category. Gender is also culturally determined so that roles ascribed to the sexes would be determined by the given cultural philosophy (Olademo, 2009: 11). In this sense, gender can be said to be a fluid social category. As a concept conceived on notions of difference-hierarchy and power relations, it is imbued with complexities in form and content.

Gender philosophy originated from the Feminist movements of the Western society. Feminism basically addressed issues of inequality of the sexes which were immediate and peculiar to the time and cultural context. Although it sought to liberate women from perceived “wrongs”, the differing global cultural spheres with attendant realities meant that issues under contention could neither be uniform nor approached under a common standpoint. The conflicts in the philosophies were many but with reference to the African cultural terrain, the issue was that of differing cultural structures and needs. Specifically, whilst the western society operated a hierarchy in which the woman was subordinate to the man, the African society was structured on one in which gender roles were complementary (Ogundipe, 2007). The subsequent search for a new approach is documented by Ogundipe in a lecture:

Feminism in Nigeria spawned Womanism then Motherism and other –isms as it did in the rest of the world, because women wanted to address their own realities as they established their differences from foreign feminisms. The variety represented an effort by African women to theorize their own due to the ignorance of the external world about Africa, her cultures and her women and due to the missionizing and condescending attitudes of women from the East and West that were perceived as another form of cultural imperialism (p. 7).

Because gender classifies expected roles for females and males, the sexes are expected to conform in the interest of the maintenance of law and order in the society. However, because the rules governing gender roles is determined by sole male members in most societies, it is hardly neutral as the laws are made to favour the gender of the makers, the men. Gender is also conditioned by culture and history, in which case, the rules tend to conform to demands of the time and needs of the given society. In this sense, current gender rules at work in contemporary society could be said to be the result of an ongoing

cultural change. A study of pre-colonial African society reveals that the gender rules in operation under colonialism did not reflect the norms of indigenous society. For instance, the obedient, devout and domesticated wife of colonial monogamy does not portray the image of the woman prior to colonial incursion. As an ideal of the Christian missionaries, the system of monogamy was associated with respectable modernity while marital practices remained heterogeneous (Mann, 1994).

Documents in post colonial Lagos and Sierra-Leone show that men were able to retain the privileges of multiple partnerships whilst still maintaining the respectability of monogamous marriages (Havell, 1975). The boundaries that shaped marital role discourses during the colonial era highlights the agency of women in asserting their prerogatives (Musisi, 2001.) The interplay between the traditional and modern destabilized marital structures, recasting the new system as a bundle of interactional possibilities. The studies reveal that the security of colonial monogamy which the modern wives coveted did not prove adequate compensation for the forfeit of powers and influence on the home and society which the indigenous setup guaranteed. The image of docile timidity and picture perfect housewifery proved insufficient as a replacement for active involvement in the affairs of the community.

Early feminist writing on women's role in the governance and spiritual sphere provide evidence of their marginalization as well as for the possession of spiritual power, prestige and authority (Berger, 1976). Gender power contentions highlighted in a number of studies of transformative rituals in traditional religious practice reveal ritual performances associated with spirit possession (Moore, 1979). Among the Yoruba ethnic group, the study of women as spiritual protectors of the community is documented in the study of the '*Iya-un*' of the *Gelede* feminist cult.. These spiritual representations of mothers capture almost elemental feral potency- benign and terrifying; nurturing and voracious; at once everywoman and powerfully ambivalent witch. The identifications associated with women are striking in their ambiguities as they are situated within shifting configurations of difference (Drewal & Drewal, 1983: 9). Similarly, echoing western feminist concerns about the exclusion of women from the public sphere, African evidence first provided succor, then dismay as the exclusion of women from political life that western feminists challenged became all too evident in post colonial Africa. Subsequently, feminist work on women's leadership highlighted the institutionalized position of power that women held in pre colonial era. One such position is documented by Bolanle Awe about the *Iyalode* of the Yoruba

ethnic group of South Western Nigeria. The work which has become a feminist classic is a vanguard of the validation of women's contribution to their societies in indigenous society.

### **Women and the Traditional Community**

The presentation of women and their roles in societies by historians varies. Examples of two counter views would suffice to reveal the two extremities in this regard. The first is the view of women that suggests that their role is merely honorary, rather than functional. This is characterized by the views of such works as Njaka (1987) which sees women's organization merely as one of four minor counterbalancing agents. The other view is represented in the work of Imam (1988). Here, while African men were dominant in some spheres of social life, the women were equally responsible for other areas of influence. That is, male and female roles were complimentary and issues of subordination did not arise. According to Imam,

In general, the profound philosophical ideas which underline the assignment of separate tasks to men and woman stress the complimentary rather than the separate nature of the task. Neither the division of labour nor the nature of the task implies any superiority of one over the other. (1988:21)

Nina Mbah, (1982) suggests that in pre-colonial southern Nigeria, the woman's world was not subordinated to that of the man but rather, complimentary. The role of the woman changed with the adoption of western culture in the Igbo society.

Nevertheless, the view of the woman in many cultures would suggest the intrinsic acceptance of their sacredness in the construction of terrestrial and spiritual relations of the universe, and this is particularly so in African societies. As in many cultures, whether patriarchal or matriarchal, women are believed to be especially endowed spiritually and often function as spiritual custodians of their communities.

Commenting on a parallel concept among the Yoruba ethnic group of West Africa, Ogundipe (2007), says the mother is ...accorded the sacred power of absorbing or diverting the malevolent forces unleashed against her progeny without her suffering from it (2007). According to her, the image of the woman is one imbued with reverence, especially as mothers. However,



historical observance of the role of the woman between the pre-colonial past and post independence would reveal a steady reduction in the importance of the woman in the social dynamics of African societies. Korieh (2002) notes that the study of women and their contributions as an autonomous and vital force is very recent.

A major role of women in pre-colonial Africa was as spiritual guardians of their communities, and they enjoyed the respect of their men folk in this regard until the coming of colonialism which cast negative aspersions on the powers of the female gender. Therefore, the notion that women are possessed of spiritual powers which are mysterious and elusive to the men was a challenge to the gender- supremacist mindset of colonial thinking. In the African world, with its deep consciousness of spirituality, the belief in this phenomenon is established and taken for granted.

In parallel cultures, notably that of the Yoruba, studies of the spiritual powers of women is celebrated in the phenomenon of the Gelede mask ritual dance, performed to appease the female principle, Drewal and Drewal (1972), Layiwola, (1987); Ibitokun (1993). Examples abound in pre-colonial society of communities in Igbo land which depended on women for spiritual protection of the land. One of such is documented by Achebe (2004) of the existence of female deities, notably that of Ani and priestesses who mediated on behalf of the community. Given the gender superiority that a patriarchal society grants the male, the society is bewildered and confused by the lack of understanding of this one area of female autonomy and tag it “witchcraft”. In a paper, Ayo Adeduntan (2008), comments on the portrait of the female gender in a patriarchal society thus:

*Aje* is, in aggregate of various manifestations, the female supernatural power designed to counterbalance not only the patriarchal hegemony, but also to ensure redress by the woman against human injustice.

Oyewumi (1997) states that the negative view of female powers had been engendered by practitioners of Ifa and Egungun who had set the model for the conception of the *Aje* as a force of negative energy. The male centered gender orientation of Colonial society only served to enhance an ongoing reconstruction of the female identity. According to Awe (1991), African historians seem to have inherited the bias of their western predecessors in the

omission of the role of women in the making of African history. This masculine bias, she explains is responsible for the omission of women's contribution in the writing of the eight volume *General History of Africa*, published by UNESCO in 1981. Awe maintains that following a similar trend, the *Groundwork of Nigerian History*, which is a representative standard text on the history of Nigeria, made no particular reference to the role of Nigerian women in the development of their various societies, consequent to which many segments of the study on women continue to be in a state of neglect.

### **The Igbo Concept of Women and the Umuada**

Igbo society generally places a relatively high premium on indigenous women, a fact which is apparent in their involvement in the affairs of state and as religious mediators for the community. Long before the arrival of colonialism, women have been powerful part of Igbo society. Though a patriarchal society, there are records of communities where women's associations are strong and contribute to the maintenance of law and order. *Umuada* is the association of indigenous daughters of a given community. *Umuada* is a compound collective noun from *umu* (children) and *ada* (daughter); *umu* is a generic term that conveys the sense of many. Although, the term "*ada*" is used in reference to the eldest daughter of a family, (*adaobi*), *ada* generally means a female child. In essence, all daughters of a particular village, clan, or town and whether old or young; single or married; divorced or separated, all enjoy equal rights within the group.

Today the *Umuada* is a power sociopolitical setup in Igbo culture and acts as a functional forum for women. The *Umuada* also take titles within the patrilineal community. Two of such are Nri and Aguleri towns in which women take social titles. One of such titles is the *Iyom* title, which costs a substantial amount of money and an office to which only the rich can aspire. The title is a mark of industry and wealth and encourages hard work and resourcefulness among the women folk. The group of women known as *Amu Na Uno* contributes to the maintenance of law and order by keeping surveillance in the town against thieves. These women belong to a thirty-strong association known as *Ili Madu Nato*. The group is made up of members who have been chosen and delegated by clans within villages. They also settle domestic disputes involving, for instance, cases of the destruction of crops by domestic animals. In this case, the animal may be seized until the

stipulated fine for the offence has been paid. According to Njaka, in traditional society,

the Umuada intrude in the affairs of state and can impose sanctions which may include heavy fines, and other measures. Certainly, the elders will go to great lengths to avoid confrontations with the Umuada and in this way the women indirectly exert a strong influence on affairs of state.

However, even at Nri and Aguleri, where women play important roles in the community, the condition for title taking and a role in the running of the community is that the subject *umuada* should be both of Nri origin and also married within the community. Women married from outside the community, exogamously, (*Ndiomu*) also enjoy powers which outweigh that of the *umuada* who are married outside the community. This will suggest that the Nri people operate the general system of giving up the patrilineal claim to the *umuada* upon the incidence of marriage and this represents a significant divergence from the practice of the Ogbaru towns.

#### **Umuada of Osomala**

Like many Ogbaru communities, the people of Osomala esteem the *umuada* of the town. This is evident in the degree of involvement of these women in the affairs of the town. In Ogbaru, the children of the *umuada* are given special regard though they do not belong patrilineally to the community. If they encounter problems in their fathers' home they are welcome to stay with their mother's people, pending the resolution of the issues involved. A case in point is that in Chinua Achebe's classic, *Things fall Apart*, (1958) where Okonkwo, the protagonist takes refuge in his mother's village of Mbanta, after he was ostracized for murdering his friend's son.

The children of the *Umuada* are known as "*Nwadiani*". The *ada* who is married outside the community is particularly important as they acted as informants in traditional society on behalf of their communities, taking advantage of their position as *Ndiomu* in their consanguine residence. The *umuada* function along a formal and organized system which is based on a hierarchical arrangement. Osomala is made up of nine villages, each of which is headed by the Eldest *Ada* of the village under the title of *Ada-Uku*. The roles of Umuada of Osomala may be classified under secular and spiritual categories.

### Secular Duties

The judicial duties of *umuada* include

- (1) the settlement of disputes among fellow women and the community,
- (2) infidelity issues involving offending wives,
- (3) conflicts involving physical fighting between parties,
- (4) assault or physical attack of a wife on her mother-in-law, and other issues under these categories which may fall under their jurisdiction.

Living together in close proximity within family compounds has its constraints and friction occurs occasionally amongst household members. These can range from disputes involving verbal assaults where taboo subjects are mentioned in the heat of disagreement, to the abuse of powers by a rival wife to insubordination of a wife to her mother in-law and so forth. The approach of the *umuada* in each case will depend on the gravity of the given issue. For instance, in the case of an insult directed at a mother in-law's family, this would attract a stiffer fine from the *umuada* than would a fight between two wives within the family. This is because a mother in-law is a revered figure who automatically becomes a mother to her son's wife through the process marriage. A wife is therefore expected to show even greater respect to the mother in-law than she would to her husband. An attack by a wife against her mother in-law in whatever form would therefore earn her a very stiff fine from the *umuada*.

Cases involving infidelity is an important area of *umuada* intervention. However, a meeting is arranged whereby the woman is questioned by the *umuada*, after which a verdict is passed. An offender will have to undergo ritual cleansing in addition to a fine. In such cases, which is not common among the Ogbaru peoples, the woman would have to undergo a drawn out process which is almost equivalent to a re-marriage to her spouse. Depending on the social status of the husband, she will be expected to slaughter some animal and cook a special meal for her husband after the cleansing ritual as

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nowadays, even chickens can be used for this purpose.

Physical violence from a man against his wife, and in the event of which the wife runs away, also requires the intervention of the *umuada*. In this case,

after the customary visit of the husbands family to the parents of the wife to plead for her return, the next process would be to approach the *umuada* of the estranged wife's clan to appeal so that a fine may be paid to them (as the wife cannot return without permission from the *Umuada*. These are the general areas of jurisdiction of *umuada* in Ogbaru.

### Spiritual Duties

In traditional Osomala society, spiritual authority resided in a pantheon of deities, which served different functions. At the peak of the hierarchy was God-the Creator (Olisa-kelu-Uwa). This deity is so revered that He is approached through lesser deities. *Ani*, the earth deity is the next in authority to Olisa-kelu-Uwa. *Ani* is a custodian of communal fertility and is responsible for general productivity in the community. It is *Ani* who ensures a good and bountiful harvest; making moderate rainfall available and adequate sunshine to aid the ripening of fruits. *Ani* ensures that peace and harmony reigns in the community. *Ani* is the symbol of peace, progress and general wellbeing in the community and supplication must be made to her before every dance performance within this culture.

The land generally cannot be farmed without asking for her permission. Also the most important festival, the yam [harvest] festival is held in her honour and she receives offerings during the planting season, when the first fruits are harvested. Sacred violations known as *nso* (taboos) and *alu* (abomination) are forbidden by the earth deity. The totem of *Ani* is kaolin chalk, representing her benevolent and temperate character.

The second deity to be discussed here is the *Ohai* deity. This is the deity to which all women in Osomala including indigenous women and wives married from outside the community do obeisance. The devotees meet on designated days to dance and chant in worship to the deity. As a group of community women who have vested interest in the welfare of people, the *umuada* owe allegiance to the visionary deity of *Ohai*. The *Ohai* deity is a female deity responsible for the protection of the community against invasion from enemies. Through this deity, members of the *umuada* who are endowed with visionary powers are able to foresee and prevent impending danger in the community. As a clairvoyance medium, the *umuada* could ward off the danger of an impending attack. Thus, through their constant dance worship at the shrine of *Ohai*, the psychically gifted ones are given a revelation of things to come.

An informant recalls an experience as a young child during the Nigerian civil war, when the overall leader of the *umuada* known as *Ejie*, made an announcement to the effect that no one was to go to the riverside for a given number of days because the river goddess had been violated. Every one stayed away from the river. On the evening of the same day, the decapitated head of a woman was found on the river bank. On the river beyond was her floating canoe. It was later learnt that the victim was a trader from the neighbouring village who was unwittingly travelling to Osomala to peddle her wares and had been attacked and eaten by a crocodile. The memory of this incident attests to the visionary powers of the *umuada*.

Furthermore, it is believed that the secret war plans of a given community, which could be accountable for victory over a neighbouring one, can be tapped by the psychically endowed *umuada* of a rival community. This they do through spiritual infiltration of the meetings, where the enemy cannot be seen physically. Being spiritually blind, the men speak freely, thereby divulging tactical secrets. In this way, an entire army can be ambushed, costing the community political and economic control of their former territory. Great kingdoms of the Niger valley have been defeated in the past through the assistance of powerful *umuada* from a rival kingdom. Where the *Umuada* of a given community is spiritually alert and enjoys the respect of their men folk, it will be virtually impossible for rival communities to infiltrate the precincts of the meetings.

It is the duty of the *umuada* to bathe the body of deceased female relatives and prepare it for burial. Part of the process of this bathing is the inspection of the body to identify the presence of abominable diseases such as leprosy, epilepsy or any other forbidden sickness in the communities' female dead, which would make it mandatory that the body be buried in the evil forest. Also any signs of death arising from the oaths taken at the shrine of idols would mean that such bodies cannot be buried in communal burial grounds but would be sent to the evil forest. Such bodies are taboo against the earth

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the given deity and would spiritually contaminate the community).

Yet another occasion, which requires the intervention of *umuada*, is a situation whereby a woman in the throes of labour is unable to deliver and is at risk of losing her life and that of the unborn child. Because the belief is that pregnancy is a natural occurrence, and that like the seasons, when a

pregnancy has reached its full term, the delivery of the baby should occur with ease, it is felt that the reason that could possibly prevent a delivery is a misdeed on the part of the woman. It is believed that after her confession, the foetus would be spared. Other duties include the celebration of the ritual passage of the deceased into the ancestral realm and spiritual cleansing of the community during feasts and festivals. All these sum up the duties of the *umuada* as spiritual custodians.

The *umuada* also perform in priestly capacities. For instance, in the normal day-to-day activities of the community, tension degenerates into confrontations that culminate in tragic acts such as accidental murder, matricide, incest, and other abominable acts. In such cases, it becomes a matter of urgency to carry out spiritual cleansing rites to conciliate the spirit of the earth deity to whom such acts are directed.

Although it is the members of the ancestral cult who prescribe penalties, the actual cleansing rites are carried out by the *umuada*. The process involves a ritual cleansing. After the offender has spent a specified number of days in isolation, the sacrifice of an eight-day old chick is made to the land deity. The pattern is more or less the same for all conciliatory rites with minor variations. As devotees of the land deity, specified bottles of local gin are given to the *umuada* as a traditional fee. The culprit is then made to sit in the shrine where his /her hair is shaved and thrown on the shrine emblems. The women dance triumphantly around the culprit and the ceremony comes to an end. These activities take about eight days to complete.

The *umuada* generally undertake the spiritual cleansing of the community during feasts and festivals and the worship of deities on a day-to-day basis, thus making them the custodian of the community's security.

### **Osomala Umuada and the Dual Identity**

The association of indigenous women known as *umuada* of Ogbaru people exemplified in this study of Osomala faction is a distinctive group of women. This is because they perform extended responsibilities outside the general responsibilities of the *umuada*. Generally in Igbo culture, when a woman is married outside her community it is assumed that authority and guardianship over the woman is automatically transferred to the consanguine community. Hence, as in the case of (Nri and Aguleri), earlier cited, the marriage to a suitor from outside the community diminishes the responsibilities of the

*umuada* to her affine community, and consequently her influence in the patrilineal forum.

The Ogbaru case is different from that of the Nri/Aguleri *umuada*, whose influence is limited within her immediate family and her siblings (male and female, where they are younger). Her new responsibility in her consanguine community would be in the capacity of an *Ndiomu*, an association of married women. There are duties spelled out for the woman in this setting; some in co-operation with the *umuada* of the consanguine family and others uniquely set out for the *Ndiomu*. This system absolves the Nri/Aguleri *umuada* of responsibility to the affine community.

However, among the Ogbaru people, while authority is relinquished to the consanguine community, she is nevertheless still a member of her affinal community and is expected to perform her duties as an *umuada*, at least partially and within the limits that the duties of marriage would allow. There is one obligation she must fulfill and that is to assume her position as the leader of the *umuada* unit of her village when she attains the position of the eldest female member of her village. According to the *Ada-Uku* of Isiolu village of Osomala (Fig. 2), in indigenous society, the situation may be remedied by the woman through the arrangement of another wife to cater for the man in her absence. However in contemporary society, especially with the coming of Christianity and urbanization, an *umuada* member who resides in the city chooses a family member to fill in her role and carry out the duties expected of her, especially that of worshiping at the shrine of the *Ohai* deity and the pouring of libation to the ancestral emblems.





**Fig.2 Madam Okuona, the Oyata of Isiolu village, Osomala during the interview with the researcher.**

In the present dispensation, the *Ada-Uku* is still expected to attend meetings and meet the cash donations used for community development. This arrangement implies that the woman's duties are split between the affinal community and the consanguine one. To highlight this dual identity of *umuada*, even where she spends her entire lifetime in her consanguine community, her body must be returned to her paternal relations for interment.

### **Implications of the Duality of Identity**

We now examine the dynamics at work arising from the activities expected of the woman of Osomala extraction. In the indigenous setting, while the king and his council of elders (*ndichie*) exercised the highest authority in governance, this authority was nevertheless subject to that of the gods of the land, represented by the deities. The *umuada* as devotees of the *Ohai* deity and as mouthpieces of the oracle are in a position to make pronouncements which may have far reaching consequences for both communities. Whether these pronouncements come from the deities, or whether they are products of the female wisdom of the *umuada*, considering their stake in the outcome of decisions taken, is not clear. What is relevant is that the pronouncements have served the community in good stead in the past. As an *ndiomu* member,

the woman has duties that include the preparation of meals during festivals and title taking events in her consanguine community. It is also their duty to prepare ritual items and props used in the performance of female burial dances (Fig 3). There are other duties which the *ndiomu* are expected to perform but which cannot be exhausted in this seminar. What is important to remark here is that the *umuada* of Osomala, continues to attend the dance sessions expected of every *umuada*. She will also be expected to assume her position as *ada-uku* (the eldest woman or chief *ada*) when such a time comes, provided she had reached menopause, she will be expected to return to her community and take up her position. In the event that she cannot, she will be expected to marry a substitute wife for her husband to fill her role in her absence. This is the first *implication* arising from her dual identity.



Fig. 3. The *umuada* preparing props for a burial dance.

The other implication of the duality of identity arises from the injunction by the woman's affines that her body must be returned to them for burial. In the

interview with the chief informant, he stated that the children of the deceased *umuada* are expected to visit the grave of their late mother from time to time. These visits would provide opportunity for continued interaction with their mother's relations. These visits apparently strengthen the filial ties between the *nwadiani* and the maternal relations. In situations of conflict between an offspring's paternal land and the maternal, it would be natural for the children to mediate in favor of the late mother's community or at the very least, help ameliorate the conflict.

Osomala as an Ogbaru kingdom enjoyed the alliance of many neighboring towns in the region. A respondent from Odekpe town stated that the request for the return of deceased *umuada* was a tactic of ensuring political support and cohesion within the region. It is clear then that the influence of the *umuada* of igbo land, particularly of Ogbaru land is so strongly felt because of the patrilineal identity which they carry into matrimony. This system not only engenders that they remain loyal to their affines, but that they also continue to serve as spiritual protectors of their people.

### **Conclusion**

Information on the woman and their role in indigenous society is a prerequisite to the understudying of the capabilities which reside in the female gender. What is needed is untiring research in this direction. Given the social and economic problems that characterize the post-colonial atmosphere of third world Africa, the acquired and ill fitting gender bias of colonial heritage should be dispersed with in favor of tapping the residual knowledge and wisdom of our women. Research into gender role distribution in indigenous society should provide this information which can then serve as a tool for harnessing this potential in our women. Gender theories should also aim for models directed achieving interactive gender role playing, so that this balance of roles in indigenous society may be reflected in the current post-colonial dispensation. In this way, the agenda for gender balance in our government may become a reality.

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