A "Her-Storical" Conceptualization of the "Umuada" Traditional Institution of Eastern Nigeria

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Abstract

This study explores a sociocultural organization of women in Eastern Nigeria through the lens of feminist and historical scholarship. The aim is to examine the historical evolution, roles, and contributions of the Umuada within their communities, particularly in conflict resolution, cultural preservation, and socioeconomic development. Utilizing a qualitative methodology, the research draws from oral histories, archival records, and ethnographic observations to provide a nuanced understanding of the institution. The findings reveal that the Umuada, far from being a peripheral group, have played pivotal roles as custodians of traditions, mediators in family and communal disputes, and advocates for women's rights within the patriarchal structure of Igbo society. Despite these

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contributions, the study highlights the challenges posed by modernity, urbanization, and diminishing communal ties to the relevance and functionality of the institution. Major conclusions emphasize the need to reimagine and integrate the Umuada into contemporary frameworks for community development and gender advocacy, by ensuring their sustained impact in a rapidly changing sociocultural landscape. By foregrounding the experiences and agency of these women, the study contributes to the broader discourse on African feminism and indigenous knowledge systems.

Keywords: Umuada, Traditional Institution, Eastern Nigeria, Igbo Women, Conflict Resolution, Cultural Preservation, Socioeconomic Development.

Introduction

The Umuada traditional institution of Eastern Nigeria occupies a pivotal position in the sociocultural fabric of Igbo society. Comprising women who are daughters of a particular lineage, the Umuada retains enduring ties to their natal communities despite marital affiliations. Their roles span critical domains such as conflict resolution, enforcement of cultural norms, and socioeconomic interventions. From inception, the Umuada has been instrumental in preserving harmony and ensuring accountability within patriarchal structures. Nevertheless, research on their contributions remains limited, with few attempts to place their experiences at the core of broader discussions on gender, power, and indigenous knowledge systems (Amadiume, 1987; Okonjo, 1976).

Recently, authors such as Tamale (2020), Udeze (2024), and Onyesoh (2021) have sought to promote their ideologies. This study seeks to address this gap by offering a "her-storical" perspective, one that prioritizes the agency and voices of the Umuada in historical and contemporary contexts. The significance of this study lies in its contribution to feminist historiography and the reimagining of indigenous institutions. By foregrounding the Umuada, it sheds light on their evolving roles in a rapidly changing society, including the challenges posed by urbanization, globalization, and the erosion

of communal structures. Furthermore, it highlights the ways in which this institution can serve as a model for grassroots leadership and gender advocacy in contemporary development frameworks.

The primary objectives of this research are to trace the historical evolution of the Umuada institution, examine their sociocultural and political roles, and assess their relevance in modern-day Igbo society. While prior studies, such as those by Chuku (2005), Achebe (2011), and Mba (1982), have utilized historical and anthropological methods to explore the Umuada, they often overlooked the gendered dynamics that underpin the institution. This study, therefore, adopts a modified methodology, integrating feminist historiography, oral history, and ethnographic observation.

These approaches enable a more nuanced and inclusive analysis of the Umuada, positioning them not merely as enforcers of tradition but as active agents of social transformation. By employing this multidisciplinary framework, the study offers fresh insights into the intersections of gender, tradition, and community leadership. It also situates the Umuada as a critical lens through which to explore the broader themes of African feminism, indigenous governance, and the resilience of cultural institutions in the face of modernization.

Literature Review

The Umuada traditional institution has garnered limited but significant scholarly attention within the broader discourse of African social systems, gender roles, and indigenous governance. This review situates the Umuada within feminist historiography, highlights their sociocultural functions, and explores the research gaps that necessitate a "her-storical" conceptualization. Okonjo (1976) provides one of the earliest insights into the Umuada, describing them as custodians of tradition and vital actors in maintaining social harmony within Igbo society. Her work underscores their mediatory role in family disputes and their enforcement of communal norms. However, her analysis primarily focuses on their structural organization, offering

limited engagement with the gendered power dynamics underpinning their roles. Building on Okonkwo's foundational work, Amadiume (1987) investigates the interplay between gender and power in Igbo society, highlighting the Umuada as a counterbalance to patriarchal authority. She emphasizes their dual role as both enforcers of patriarchal norms and advocates for women's interests.

Amadiume's feminist lens brings a nuanced understanding of the Umuada, yet her study does not adequately address the institution's evolution in response to modernization and urbanization. Other scholars, such as Nwoye (2007), have explored the Umuada within the context of conflict resolution. Nwoye's analysis positions the Umuada as critical actors in alternative dispute resolution, particularly in cases involving family and communal disputes. While this perspective highlights their practical contributions to societal cohesion, it overlooks the historical and cultural processes that have shaped their roles. Furthermore, Chuku (2009) expands the discourse by examining the socioeconomic activities of Igbo women, including the Umuada. She argues that the institution's economic initiatives, such as mobilizing resources for community development, are integral to its influence. However, her work does not explore the implications of these activities on broader gender dynamics or the institution's relevance in contemporary governance frameworks.

In recent years, scholars have begun to adopt multidisciplinary approaches to studying the Umuada, integrating oral histories and feminist theories to uncover their lived experiences (Udeze, 2024; Nwonwu, 2024; Emeka-Nwobia, 2021). These studies highlight the importance of foregrounding women's voices in understanding the institution's historical significance and contemporary relevance. However, there remains a paucity of research that critically examines the Umuada from a "her-storical" perspective, focusing on their agency and evolving roles within a rapidly changing sociocultural landscape. This study seeks to address these gaps by adopting a feminist historiographical approach that combines archival research,

oral narratives, and ethnographic observations. By doing so, it aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the Umuada, their contributions to Igbo society, and their potential as a model for grassroots leadership and gender advocacy in contemporary Nigeria.

Historical Context of Eastern Nigeria

To understand the Umuada traditional institution and its evolving roles, it is essential to situate it within the broader historical context of Eastern Nigeria. The region's socio-political, cultural, and economic structures have undergone significant transformations across three distinct periods: the precolonial era, the colonial period, and the post-independence era. In the precolonial era, Eastern Nigeria, predominantly inhabited by the Igbo people, was characterized by decentralized and Leaderless societies. Unlike the hierarchical systems common in other African regions, the Igbos operated a dual-sex political system where both men and women held leadership roles within their respective domains (Okonjo, 1976).

Women, through organizations like the Umuada and Ndinyom (wives' associations), played a vital role in community leadership, safeguarding cultural heritage, and settling disputes. The Umuada, in particular, acted as intermediaries and guardians of tradition, ensuring the enforcement of social norms. Economically, Eastern Nigeria thrived on subsistence agriculture, trade, and crafts. Women were active participants in the economy, engaging in farming, trading, and the production of goods such as pottery and textiles. Their economic activities further reinforced their influence within the community. The Umuada used their collective strength to organize communal labour and resource mobilization, demonstrating their critical role in sustaining societal harmony.

The colonial period marked a significant disruption to the socio-political structures of Eastern Nigeria. The introduction of British indirect rule, which relied on male-dominated warrant chiefs, marginalized traditional women's institutions such as the Umuada

(Afigbo, 1972). This system disrupted the dual-sex political structure, centralizing authority in the hands of men and diminishing women's role in governance. At the same time, colonial economic policies reshaped the region's economy. The emphasis on cash crops like palm oil and the introduction of Western education brought new opportunities, but also deepened gender inequalities. As men took control of formal employment and cash crop production, women's economic contributions were significantly reduced. Despite these challenges, the Umuada remained resilient, adapting to these changes by leveraging their traditional roles to mediate conflicts and mobilize resources for community welfare.

The Umuada's resilience was particularly evident during the Aba Women's Riot of 1929, a protest led by women against colonial taxation and the excesses of warrant chiefs. Although not exclusively an Umuada movement, their organizational strategies were rooted in traditional women's institutions, demonstrating the enduring relevance of such structures in resisting colonial oppression (Allen, 1972). The post-independence period brought further changes to the socio-political and economic context of Eastern Nigeria. While independence in 1960 heralded the promise of self-governance, it also introduced new challenges, including political instability, ethnic tensions, and the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970). The war devastated Eastern Nigeria, disrupting traditional institutions and displacing communities. During this period, the Umuada played a crucial role in post-war reconstruction, providing support to displaced families and facilitating reconciliation efforts (Achebe, 2012).

In the post-war era, modernization, urbanization, and globalization have continued to reshape the sociocultural landscape of Eastern Nigeria. The erosion of communal ties and the growing influence of Western norms have posed significant challenges to the relevance of traditional institutions like the Umuada. However, they have adapted by engaging in contemporary issues such as gender advocacy, health

education, and economic empowerment. The Umuada's ability to evolve while maintaining their cultural essence underscores their resilience and continued importance in Igbo society. Additionally, the Umuada offer valuable insights into the intersections of gender, tradition, and modernity in contemporary Africa.

The Umuada Traditional Institution

The Umuada traditional institution is a sociocultural organization among the Igbo people of Eastern Nigeria, encompassing women born into a particular lineage or kin group. Membership of an Umuada group is determined by birth into a lineage or kin group, which is for life. These women, regardless of marital status, maintain a strong bond with their natal families and play critical roles in the governance, culture, and social harmony of their communities. This institution represents a unique aspect of Igbo society, rooted in traditional values that highlight the importance of kinship, collective responsibility, and gendered authority.

The term "Umuada" refers to the daughters of a lineage who retain their natal affiliations after marriage. Unlike ndinyom (married women who integrate into their husbands' families), the Umuada remain connected to their place of birth and are considered key stakeholders in the affairs of their lineage (Okonjo, 1976). This collective is typically organized based on seniority and kinship ties, with elder daughters often assuming leadership roles in decision-making and conflict resolution. The Umuada institution is multifunctional, encompassing various roles that promote social order and communal development.

Conflict Resolution: One of the most prominent roles of the Umuada is mediating disputes within families and communities. They intervene in conflicts involving inheritance, marriage, and land disputes, leveraging their perceived impartiality as natal daughters to ensure justice and fairness (Nwoye, 2007).

Cultural Custodianship: The Umuada are recognized as custodians of Igbo culture and traditions, playing essential roles in ceremonies like marriages, funerals, and purification rituals. Through their involvement, they uphold and pass down cultural norms and values from one generation to the next.

Socioeconomic Contributions: Beyond their cultural and conflict-resolution roles, the Umuada also contribute to the socioeconomic development of their communities. They organize communal labour, raise funds for community projects, and mobilize resources during emergencies such as natural disasters or family crises (Chuku, 2009).

Advocacy and Social Justice: The Umuada frequently serve as defenders of vulnerable members of society, especially women and children. They intervene in matters such as domestic abuse and marital abandonment, striving to safeguard women's rights within the male-dominated framework of Igbo society.

Gender Dynamics in Eastern Nigeria

Gender dynamics in Eastern Nigeria reflect a complex interplay of traditional cultural practices, historical influences, and modern socioeconomic developments. Among the predominantly Igbo communities of the region, gender roles are deeply rooted in the dual-sex system of governance and social organization, which historically recognized the contributions of both men and women in maintaining societal balance. However, these dynamics have evolved over time, influenced by colonialism, globalization, and contemporary gender discourse. In pre-colonial Igbo society, the dual-sex system of governance ensured that both men and women had distinct and complementary roles within their communities (Okonjo, 1976). Men traditionally held leadership positions in councils of elders and age grades, which governed community affairs and oversaw conflict resolution.

Women, on the other hand, exercised authority through institutions such as the Umuada (daughters of the lineage) and the Ndinyom (wives' association), which were responsible for maintaining social harmony and addressing issues related to gender and family welfare. This dual system acknowledged the importance of women's participation in decision-making and community development. For instance, women's economic activities, such as farming, trading, and craft-making, were integral to the prosperity of Igbo communities. Women also held significant spiritual roles as priestesses and custodians of traditional religious practices, further cementing their influence in both the material and metaphysical realms (Amadiume, 1987). The introduction of British colonial rule in the late 19th century disrupted the traditional gender balance in Eastern Nigeria. The colonial administration's reliance on the warrant chief system, which was exclusively male-dominated, marginalized women's political and social institutions (Afigbo, 1972). This erosion of women's traditional roles in governance reduced their formal influence in community decision-making. Economic changes introduced during the colonial period also had gendered effects. The focus on cash crop production, such as palm oil, shifted economic power towards men, as women's traditional roles in subsistence agriculture and local trade were devalued.

Additionally, Western education, which prioritized male enrolment, created new social hierarchies that disadvantaged women in access to education and employment opportunities (Chuku, 2009). Nigerian women leveraged market associations as platforms for political engagement. For instance, the Lagos Market Women's Association, led by figures such as Madam Alimotu Pelewura, resisted colonial economic policies and played an essential role in advocating for women's rights in commerce (Johnson, 1982). Similarly, Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, a leading Nigerian feminist, founded the Abeokuta Women's Union (AWU) in the 1940s to challenge both colonial and traditional restrictions on women's participation in governance (Byfield, 2003). The AWU fought against unfair taxation and demanded greater political representation for women.

Since Nigeria's independence in 1960, gender dynamics in Eastern Nigeria have continued to evolve, shaped by urbanization, modernization, and globalization. While traditional gender roles persist in many rural areas, modern influences have introduced new opportunities and challenges for women. Increased access to education and economic opportunities has empowered many women in Eastern Nigeria. Women now participate in professional fields such as medicine, law, and academia, contributing to the region's socioeconomic development. However, disparities in education and employment persist, particularly in rural areas where cultural norms and economic barriers remain significant (Nwoye, 2007). Women's groups and non-governmental organizations have emerged as advocates for gender equality and women's rights. Modernization and globalization have also introduced new challenges, including the erosion of communal ties and the commodification of cultural practices, as traditional values and social structures are increasingly replaced by individualism and market-driven influences.

While some women have benefited from modern economic opportunities, others face increased vulnerability due to poverty, migration, and socioeconomic inequalities. These could present significant challenges to the role and influence of Umuada in contemporary society. As more women migrate to urban centres or abroad in search of better economic prospects, their participation in Umuada activities may decline. This shift could weaken the collective power of the group in mediating family and community affairs. (Chuku, 2009). However, despite the changes brought about by colonialism and modernity, traditional gendered institutions such as the Umuada and Ndinyom have demonstrated remarkable resilience by adapting to contemporary realities while maintaining their cultural significance.

They have bridged the gap between tradition and modernity in several ways, ensuring their continued influence on gender dynamics in Eastern Nigeria. While traditional conflict resolution relied on customary laws, these institutions now integrate legal awareness and

advocacy for women's rights, ensuring fairness in dispute settlements. Umuada and Ndinyom have evolved into support networks that provide financial assistance, cooperative savings schemes, and small business funding. They empower women economically, enabling them to navigate contemporary financial pressures while maintaining communal solidarity.

These groups have become platforms for addressing gender-based issues such as domestic violence, inheritance rights, and women's political participation. By working with NGOs and government agencies, they promote gender equity while staying rooted in indigenous values. While modernity has altered many aspects of society, Umuada and Ndinyom continue to uphold traditional rites, ceremonies, and moral values. They ensure the transmission of cultural knowledge to younger generations, reinforcing a sense of identity amid global influences.

By incorporating modern education and leadership training into their traditional structures, these institutions help younger women engage with their heritage while equipping them with skills to navigate contemporary society. In contemporary times, these groups also engage in public health campaigns, advocating for maternal health, sanitation, and disease prevention. They collaborate with local health authorities and international organizations to improve community well-being. Through these adaptive strategies, Umuada and Ndinyom maintain their relevance, ensuring that while gender roles evolve, the values of collective responsibility and women's agency in Igbo society remain intact.

Women's Empowerment Movements

Women's empowerment movements have played a crucial role in challenging systemic inequalities, advocating for gender equality, and creating spaces for women's voices in social, political, and economic spheres. In Nigeria and beyond, various women's groups have been instrumental in these efforts. Some of these movements

share similarities with the traditional Igbo women's groups, such as Umuada, while others have developed distinct structures and objectives. Additionally, some contemporary organizations are either supplanting Umuada, merging it with Ndinyom, or creating hybrid forms of women's mobilization. These include: Federation of Muslim Women's Associations in Nigeria (FOMWAN), an Islamic-based women's organization promoting education, social development, and advocacy for Muslim women (Salihu, 2015). Unlike Umuada and Ndinyom, FOMWAN is not lineage-based but draws membership from diverse Muslim communities across Nigeria. Women's Wing of the Christian Association of Nigeria (WOWICAN) serves as a platform for Christian women across different denominations to advocate for gender equality, social justice, and community development. It has a hierarchical structure with national, state, and local chapters, allowing for grassroots participation and national coordination (Nwachukwu, 2013). Market Women's Associations.

These associations, such as the Lagos Market Women's Association, have been pivotal in women's economic and political mobilization. Their structure differs significantly from Umuada, as they are occupationally rather than lineage-based. Women in Politics Forum (WIPF) and the Nigerian Women Trust Fund (NWTF) aim to increase female political participation. These groups often work independently of traditional structures like Umuada and Ndinyom but may collaborate with them on gender-focused issues (Tripp, 2015). Some contemporary movements have sought to merge or replace traditional women's groups like Umuada and Ndinyom by integrating modern advocacy strategies.

This shift is mostly driven by the need for cross-community alliances beyond lineage-based systems, legal and policy engagement, which traditional groups often lack, and a focus on global feminist concerns, such as gender-based violence and political representation. Examples include: The National Council of Women's Societies (NCWS), which brings together multiple women's groups under a unified national

framework (Mba, 1982). The African Women's Development and Communication Network (FEMNET), which integrates traditional and modern feminist approaches across Africa (Tamale, 2020). The merging or transformation of these groups reflects broader societal changes and the need for more inclusive, structured women's organizations that address contemporary gender challenges.

In Africa, for example, colonialism disrupted preexisting socio-political structures where women held influential roles, leading to movements aimed at reclaiming lost agency (Tamale, 2020). Similarly, in the Western world, the feminist waves of the 19th and 20th centuries have deeply influenced modern gender equality movements (Hooks, 2000). Countries with progressive gender laws and policies, such as gender quotas in political representation, foster stronger women's movements (Tripp, 2015). Conversely, in regions where restrictive laws limit women's rights, empowerment movements often focus on legal reforms and advocacy for policy changes (Ogunsanya, 2018). The struggle for women's empowerment can be traced back to the early suffrage movements of the 19th and early 20th centuries. These movements aimed to secure voting rights for women, addressing the political exclusion that defined patriarchal systems. In the United Kingdom, the Suffragettes, led by figures such as Emmeline Pankhurst, played a crucial role in demanding and securing women's right to vote (Pugh, 2000).

In the United States, the 19th Amendment was ratified in 1920, granting women the right to vote. Susan B. Anthony and Carrie Chapman Catt were key figures in the suffrage movement, with Catt's "Winning Plan" playing a crucial role in securing its passage (Wheeler, 1995). In Africa, women's empowerment movements have often been intertwined with anti-colonial struggles. For example, during Nigeria's colonial era, the Aba Women's Riot of 1929 marked a significant moment of collective resistance, where women protested against colonial taxation and political exclusion led by Margaret Ekpo (Matera, Bastian & Kent, 2012; Awe,1992). The Aba Women's Riot was part of a broader history of African

women's resistance to oppression. Comparable movements across Africa include: The Women's War in Côte d'Ivoire (1949) led by Marie Koré, Ivorian women protested against the imprisonment of political leaders and colonial repression (Bouquet, 2001), the 1956 Women's March in South Africa organized by Lilian Ngoyi, Helen Joseph, Rahima Moosa, and Sophia Williams-De Bruyn, over 20,000 women marched to Pretoria to protest the pass laws (Hassim, 2006) and the Anlu Rebellion in Cameroon (1958–1961) led by Kom women, this movement resisted government-imposed agricultural policies that threatened their farming rights (Diduk, 2004). These events underscored the power of collective action among women in addressing structural inequalities. Since the late 20th century, women's empowerment movements have expanded their focus to address a wide range of issues, including education, healthcare, gender-based violence, and economic empowerment. These movements often operate at the intersection of grassroots activism and international advocacy, drawing attention to global challenges while addressing localized concerns. Some movements have worked to increase women's representation in political leadership.

Campaigns for gender quotas in political offices have been instrumental in countries such as Rwanda, where women now hold over 60% of parliamentary seats, the highest percentage in the world (Devlin & Elgie, 2008). The rise of Nigerian women in leadership across banking, academia, and governance reflects the foundational role of the Umuada in promoting female leadership, social justice, and community development. Just as the Umuada historically influenced decision-making and conflict resolution, contemporary female leaders now shape policies, drive economic growth, and advocate for gender equality. Their achievements align with the Umuada's legacy of empowerment, ensuring women's voices are heard in governance, business, and education. This modern adaptation highlights the continuity of indigenous female leadership structures in fostering societal progress and transformation.

Her-Story vs. History: Reclaiming Women's Voices in Historical Narratives

The dichotomy between Her-story and history represents a critical discussion in the field of feminist historiography. Traditionally, history has been written by and about men, reflecting a patriarchal view that often sidelines or diminishes the contributions and experiences of women. The term Her-story serves as both a critique of this male-dominated historical narrative and a call to reclaim women's voices, acknowledging their roles as active agents in shaping society. This shift challenges the notion that history is a neutral and objective recounting of events and instead highlights how gendered perspectives influence historical recording and interpretation (Scott, 1986).

Historically, women's contributions were "largely" overlooked or relegated to the private, domestic sphere, which was deemed less significant than the public domains of politics, war, and governance. Men, as the dominant producers of historical texts, shaped the narrative, presenting history through a male-centric lens that often omitted or simplified women's roles. This exclusion reflects broader cultural and institutional structures that have marginalized women in many societies (Klein, 2011). As a result, women were often seen as passive figures in the historical process, while men's actions in the public sphere were seen as central to the progression of history (Tosh, 2015). The rise of feminist historiography in the 1970s marked a critical turning point in the study of history.

In Africa, this movement gained momentum during the late 20th century as scholars began to challenge the male-dominated narratives that had previously characterized African historiography. A significant development in this regard was the establishment of Feminist Africa, a continental gender studies journal produced by a community of feminist scholars, providing a platform for intellectual and activist research (Feminist Africa, 2024). African feminist historiography focuses on the unique experiences of African women, addressing the

intersections of gender, colonialism, and post-colonialism. Scholars such as Nwando Achebe have been instrumental in this field. Achebe's works, including Farmers, Traders, Warriors, and Kings: Female Power and Authority in Northern Igboland, 1900–1960 (2005) and The Female King of Colonial Nigeria: Ahebi Ugbabe (2011), explore the roles and agency of African women in historical contexts, contributing significantly to the understanding of gender dynamics in African societies. This movement sought to redress the imbalance by re-examining history through the lens of women's experiences, contributions, and struggles. Feminist historians, such as Lerner (1986), advocated for the creation of a "history of women," which would acknowledge their integral roles in shaping both the public and private domains of society. This approach not only challenged the exclusion of women from historical narratives but also aimed to highlight the systemic inequalities that shaped women's lives across different cultures and periods. Feminist scholars rejected the notion of a neutral, objective history, instead emphasizing how historical narratives were shaped by gendered power relations.

The focus was not only on recovering women's stories but also on understanding the structures that silenced them in traditional historical accounts (Scott, 1986). Scholars such as Ifeka-Moller (1975) have analyzed the Women's War of 1929, emphasizing female militancy and colonial revolt in Eastern Nigeria. Bolanle Awe's research marked a turning point in the male-dominated telling of Nigeria's colonial and pre-colonial history. Although her primary focus has been on Yorubaland, her methodologies and insights have influenced feminist historiography across Nigeria. Chima J. Korieh has also contributed to this field, focusing on gender and colonial agricultural policies in the Igbo region.

His article, "The Invisible Farmer? Women, Gender, and Colonial Agricultural Policy in the Igbo Region of Nigeria, 1913–1954" (Korieh, 2001), examines how colonial policies impacted Igbo women farmers. These scholars, among others, have been instrumental in

advancing feminist historiography in Eastern Nigeria, ensuring that women's voices and experiences are integral to the understanding of the region's history. One of the primary challenges in rewriting history to include women's voices is the scarcity of sources that document women's lives. Furthermore, many women's stories were passed down orally, which presents its own challenges in terms of documentation and preservation, particularly in societies that have long prioritized written records (Thompson, 2013).

Another significant obstacle is the tendency of historians to focus on large-scale events, such as wars, revolutions, and political movements, which often overlook the more subtle, everyday contributions of women. While women were active in movements and societies, their roles were often underrepresented in mainstream historical texts. In particular, women of colour, working-class women, and other marginalized groups are even less represented in traditional histories (Crenshaw, 1991).

In Africa, for instance, Queen Nzinga of Ndongo and Matamba (Angola) led fierce resistance against Portuguese colonisation in the 17th century, using diplomacy and military strategies to protect her people (Heywood, 2017). Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti (Nigeria) was a prominent leader in anti-colonial struggles and women's rights advocacy, yet her contributions are often overshadowed by male nationalists (Olusanya, 1980). Lilian Ngoyi and Albertina Sisulu (South Africa) were crucial figures in the anti-apartheid movement, leading women's protests and advocating for social justice, yet their roles are often minimised in mainstream narratives (Hassim, 2006).

The feminist revision of history is not just about recovering women's voices but also about reclaiming their agency. The traditional historical narrative often depicted women as passive, subject to the actions of men. In contrast, feminist historians argue that women have always been active participants in the shaping of society, whether through political activism, economic contributions, or cultural influence

(Lerner, 1986). Feminist historiography has sought to identify and elevate these acts of agency, showing that women were not merely passive observers but integral to the events that have shaped history.

Importance of Her-Story

Her-story has challenged the patriarchal foundations of traditional historical narratives and has amplified the voices of women whose contributions have historically been sidelined or erased. Her-story is a feminist approach to history that seeks to recover, celebrate, and understand the roles women have played in shaping societies, cultures, and events across time. The downplaying of women's agency in mainstream historical records has resulted in a distorted and incomplete view of the past—an imbalance that Her-story seeks to address. This recovery not only enhances historical accuracy but also empowers women by acknowledging their agency, thereby offering a more inclusive view of history that better reflects the diverse experiences of all individuals. Another significant aspect of Her-story is its ability to fill gaps in traditional historical knowledge. Mainstream history has often focused on political, military, and economic narratives dominated by men, leaving little space for understanding the social, cultural, and everyday contributions of women (Strobel, 1999; Rowbotham, 2015; Smith, 2000).

By focusing on the experiences of women, Her-story expands the scope of historical research to include previously overlooked dimensions of human life, such as domestic work, caregiving, and informal economies, which have been essential to the functioning of societies. The inclusion of women's experiences also provides new insights into the dynamics of power, resistance, and social change. For example, feminist historians have illuminated how women's labour, both paid and unpaid, has been critical in shaping modern economies and social structures. Understanding these roles challenges dominant economic theories that have historically excluded the contributions of women (Acker, 2006). Thus, Her-story helps produce a more holistic and accurate account of history.

The essence of Her-story extends beyond academic inquiry; it also plays a vital role in promoting gender equality and social justice.

By recognizing and celebrating women's contributions to history, Her-story challenges the cultural stereotypes and societal structures that perpetuate gender inequality. The feminist project of rewriting history is, in essence, a project of empowerment. It repositions women not as passive bystanders in history but as active agents whose actions shaped the world in profound ways. The visibility of women's achievements and struggles serves as a tool for inspiring future generations of women and girls, providing them with role models and a sense of historical continuity. It also offers a framework for understanding contemporary gender issues, as the historical invisibility of women has shaped current gender norms and power dynamics. By making women's contributions visible, Her-story advocates for a more equitable society in which women's voices are heard and their actions are valued (Kendall,2020; Block, Alexander, & Norton, 2020; Favilli & Cavallo, 2016). These authors contribute to the ongoing effort to make women's contributions visible, advocating for a more inclusive and equitable understanding of history.

Contemporary Relevance of the Umuada

In contemporary Nigerian society, the relevance of the Umuada is increasingly being redefined in response to socio-political changes, the influence of globalization, and shifting gender dynamics. This shift provides an opportunity to explore the evolving significance of the Umuada and its role in contemporary Nigerian society. The Umuada, traditionally tasked with upholding cultural practices, maintaining peace within the community, and supporting family structures, remains a vital institution for preserving traditional values in a rapidly changing world. In the context of Nigeria's contemporary challenges, such as political instability, economic hardship, and social fragmentation, the Umuada serves as a stabilizing force. Many Umuada groups are involved in various

forms of social activism, promoting traditional practices such as the preservation of language, rituals, and indigenous knowledge systems (Njoku, 2014). For instance, in Ogbaruland, the Umuada serve as custodians of cultural heritage, overseeing rituals and ceremonies that reinforce indigenous knowledge systems. Their involvement in community affairs underscores their commitment to preserving traditional practices (Obasi & Nnamani, 2015).

Furthermore, the Umuada in Enugu have extended their influence beyond cultural preservation to include socio-political organization. Registered with the Corporate Affairs Commission, they engage in activities that promote Igbo culture and address contemporary societal issues, blending tradition with modernity (Obasi & Nnamani, 2015). In Ogwuaniocha (Anambra State), the Umuada group has been instrumental in conflict resolution and maintaining social harmony. They actively participate in cultural preservation by ensuring that traditional practices and rituals are upheld, thereby fostering community cohesion (Ajeli, 2017). Umuada groups play a vital role in preserving Igbo cultural identity, particularly among younger generations vulnerable to urbanization and globalization. Their efforts span several key areas, including cultural heritage preservation, where they safeguard indigenous knowledge, rituals, and traditions. They also engage in conflict resolution, mediating disputes within families and communities to maintain harmony.

Beyond tradition, Umuada groups contribute to community development and advocacy, championing education, women's rights, and public health while actively participating in local governance. Additionally, they play a crucial role in promoting the Igbo language and culture, especially in the diaspora, where organizations like Umuada Igbo Organization International Inc. educate younger generations on their heritage. Through these diverse initiatives, Umuada groups act as custodians of Igbo traditions, ensuring their relevance and resilience in a rapidly changing world (Ikòrò, 2023; Amani, 2021; Umuada Igbo Organization International Inc., 2018). Their influence extends beyond the domestic sphere into

broader social development, as they take part in grassroots initiatives that contribute to sustainable development in their communities (Obi, 2017). One of the most significant changes in the Umuada's contemporary relevance is the evolving role of women within the institution. Traditionally, the Umuada was structured around specific cultural roles that placed women in advisory and mediatory capacities. While these roles were important, they were often limited in scope, particularly in relation to decision-making and leadership.

The growing recognition of women as active agents of change in both traditional and modern political spheres contributes significantly to the relevance of the Umuada in contemporary society. Moreover, as women increasingly occupy spaces in local governance, civil society, and education, the Umuada's influence has expanded, encouraging women to challenge gender-based inequalities and advocating for reforms that benefit not only women but the entire community (Aina, 2018). The association's contemporary role in promoting gender equity, facilitating women's education, and tackling issues such as child marriage, domestic violence, and gender-based discrimination underscores the ongoing importance of this traditional institution in the modern era. Globalization and technological advancements have created new challenges and opportunities for the Umuada. On the one hand, these changes have brought about cultural homogenization, which has sometimes led to the erosion of traditional practices and values.

However, the digital age also offers the Umuada a platform to engage with younger generations, share information, and connect across geographical boundaries. Social media platforms, online forums, and digital networks now enable Umuada members to interact, share experiences, and collaborate on initiatives that enhance their visibility and effectiveness in both local and global contexts (Emejulu & McGregor, 2019). For instance, the United Umuada Igbo Club International (UUICI), a global organization of professionals dedicated to empowering Igbo women worldwide, leverages digital platforms to conduct advocacy campaigns on

various women's issues, facilitates skill acquisition programmes, and promotes cultural heritage.

Their initiatives have led to increased awareness and action on women's rights within Igbo communities globally (UUICI, 2022). With a presence in countries such as Nigeria, the United States, and the United Kingdom, UUICI facilitates the sharing of resources, experiences, and best practices, amplifying the organization's impact worldwide (UUICI, 2024). As a result, they have become instrumental in shaping public opinion and influencing policy in ways that contribute to greater gender equality and social transformation.

Despite its contemporary relevance, the Umuada institution may face several challenges that could hinder its full potential, including the generational divide between older and younger women. While older members of the Umuada are deeply rooted in traditional practices, younger generations, especially those in urban areas, are more focused on modernity and less interested in traditional roles. Another challenge is the influence of patriarchy, which still pervades many aspects of Nigerian society.

While the Umuada has made strides in empowering women, it must contend with ongoing gender inequalities that restrict women's full participation in decision-making at the highest levels. Traditional gender norms sometimes limit the influence of female leaders within the institution, despite their increasing visibility and empowerment (Obi, 2017). In an age where gender equality and women's empowerment are at the forefront of global discourse, the Umuada plays a crucial role in promoting these ideals while simultaneously preserving cultural heritage.

Conclusion

The exploration of the Umuada traditional institution through a "Her-storical" lens has illuminated the significant roles women have played in shaping the social, cultural, and political landscapes

of Eastern Nigeria. By focusing on the gendered dynamics of the Umuada, this study has demonstrated how the institution, rooted in traditions, has evolved and adapted over time in response to colonialism, post-independence societal changes, and the challenges of modernity. Through the process of reclaiming women's histories and contributions, the study has underscored the importance of Her-story in rethinking traditional narratives that often marginalize or downplay female agency.

The Umuada, originally a body responsible for maintaining social order and cultural practices, has transformed into an influential platform for female empowerment and activism, advocating for gender equality, social justice, and community development. Its significance in the present day mirrors a broader effort to recognize women's agency in African societies, where their voices—once largely suppressed in formal political and social arenas—are now increasingly influencing public discourse and policy.

Despite contemporary challenges, the persistence of this institution as a vital component of community life underscores its resilience and capacity for adaptation. A "Her-storical" understanding of the Umuada not only revitalizes the importance of this traditional institution but also reinforces the broader feminist project of reclaiming women's histories. This study contributes to a more inclusive and accurate portrayal of history, one that recognizes the central role women have played in shaping societies, not just as passive participants but as active agents of change in both traditional and contemporary contexts.

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