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(Re)Venturing into the Public Sphere: Historical Sociology of ‘August Meeting’ among Igbo Women in Nigeria

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Abstract

August meetings, the annual mothers’ congresses held in the month of August, witness massive home-coming of ‘Igbo women’ to their marital rural hometowns, where they unite with their rural-based colleagues for community development purposes. However, they have of recent delved into the hitherto public sphere domains exclusive to the men-folk. Indeed, these truly typify the rise of women as a social force and their conscious pursuit of development. But, how truly participatory are they? To what extent have they empowered the women-folk in the public sphere?

This study articulates the idea of the public sphere within the Igbo context and develops a comprehensive analysis and view of the agency of women’s participation therein, by focusing on their grassroots initiatives and the crucial roles they play in societal development. It analyses the history and evolution of the ‘August Meeting’, throwing light on its structure, functions and operational modes. It further demonstrates the degree of this meeting’s autonomy from men’s groups, and highlights the factors that inhibit these women in further negotiating a space in the public sphere. It concludes that the ‘August Meeting’ has a critical mandate in Igbo political affairs and represents the socio-economic and cultural development initiative of women.

Résumé

Les congrès des mères ou *August meetings* tenus annuellement au cours du mois d’août, sont l’occasion du retour au pays massif « des femmes Igbos » dans leurs foyers matrimoniaux en milieu rural où elles s’unissent avec leurs les femmes qui sont restées au village pour discuter du développement communautaire. Souvent, elles ont réfléchi sur des domaines jusqu’ici réservés exclusivement aux hommes, notamment la gestion des conflits, la consolidation de la paix et les autres problèmes liés à la vie en milieu rural. C’est ce qui révèle la montée en puissance

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des femmes qui se révèlent être une force sociale consciente des problèmes de développement. Mais ces congrès sont-ils réellement participatifs ? Dans quelle mesure ont-ils permis l'accès des femmes à la sphère publique ?

Cette présente étude articule l'idée de la sphère publique dans le contexte Igbo et développe une analyse compréhensive et une vision exhaustive de la participation des femmes dans cette sphère tout en mettant l'accent sur leurs initiatives propres et les rôles cruciaux qu'elles jouent dans le développement social. Elle analyse l'histoire et l'évolution de « la Réunion d'août », jetant la lumière sur sa structure, ses fonctions et ses modes opérationnels. Elle démontre aussi le degré d'autonomie de cette réunion par rapport aux groupes d'hommes et souligne les facteurs inhibitifs qui empêchent ces femmes de négocier un espace dans la sphère publique. Elle conclut que « la Réunion d'août » a un mandat crucial dans des affaires politiques igbos et représente l'initiative de développement socio- économique et culturelle des femmes.

Introduction

In the pre-colonial era, Igbo women had direct involvement and considerable influence in the public sphere, which was defined through institutional provisions as the socio-political arena. The advent of colonialism, however, introduced some policies which put women and their activities down, and considerably diminished the women's status and agency in Igboland. The prevailing situation in the post-colonial age has manifested efforts being made to have women regain their 'lost glory' and agency. This has been tried through initiatives by government and/or private individuals, with varying degrees of success and impact in the society. The focus of this article is on one of such Igbo women enterprises – the 'August Meeting'. It analyses the meeting from both historical and sociological perspectives and engages the essence of the women's activism and agencies through the meetings; as well as the achievements and challenges of this women's august assembly. The underlying argument of this article is that married women among the Igbo, through their annual 'August Meeting', are moving into the public sphere, which was hitherto largely considered the exclusive domain of men.

The 'August Meeting' is fast becoming a powerful and purposeful socio-political symbol and strategy for the exercise of power and maintenance of identity among the Igbo, affecting all realms of life and 'restoring' the once strong political voice of the womenfolk in traditional communities. In other words, through this annual home-coming congress, Igbo women hold some socio-political influence and have become active actors and agents in the Igbo public sphere. Such initiatives, activities and participation in rural

development are critical factors in understanding the politics and dynamics of any developing rural society; as development in such contexts almost always depends on changes in the cooperation of women and men in activities undertaken at the village and community level. The fact that little or no data exists on this new trend of Igbo women (re)venturing into the public sphere is, one would suggest or argue, a function of these activities not being reported largely due to neglect of *women affairs* by mainstream scholarship, rather than their not occurring.

This article is divided into nine sections, each tackling a vital area that would aid our proper understanding of these 'August Meeting' assemblies of Igbo women and their venturing into the Igbo public sphere. The next (second) section is a brief anthropological and geographical explanation of where the study is located. The third section briefly underlines what constitutes the public sphere in societies and tries to establish the fundamental links or nexus of similarities it has with the Igbo women's 'August Meeting'. A cursory survey of the various arguments by some Igbo scholars for and against women's visibility and participation in the Igbo public sphere, from the pre-colonial setting to the present, is focused on in the fourth section. The fifth section looks at the history, structure and dynamics of the 'August Meeting' assembly among Igbo women, while the sixth section gives an overview of the assembly's agency and activism in traditional communities. Since such group formations and operations are often not without 'hiccups', the seventh section examines some of the criticisms of and challenges facing the 'August Meeting'. The eighth section of the article presents the conclusions drawn from the whole discussion.

Anthropological and Geographical Location of the Study

The Igbo constitute one of the three major ethno-cultural and linguistic groups in Nigeria. Igboland is located in the north of the Delta swamplands, east of the Niger River and west of the Cross River, occupying the south-southern parts (Niger delta region) of present-day Nigeria. This Igbo homeland, covering an area of about 15,800 square miles (Ibewuike 2006:35), stretches 'across the River Niger from the west of Agbor to the fringes of the Cross River and running roughly from north of Nsukka highlands to some parts of the Atlantic coast' (Ogbalu 1973:5). In terms of ethnic and other neighbourliness, the ethnic Igbo are bounded on the east by the Ibibio and Efik nations, on the southeast by the Cross River, on the south-west by the Ijaw and Igado ethnic groups, and on the northern parts by the Idoma, Akpoto and Mushin ethnic nationalities (Nzimiro 1965:117-118; Ibewuike 2006:35). Linguistically, all Igbo sub-ethnic groups speak a common language,

Igbo (Uchendu 1993:5), which has been grouped into the *Kwa* linguistic stock, though with diverse variations of dialects (Nzimiro 1965:117), and have similar traditions and customs (Ogbalu 1973; Ifemesia 1979; Afigbo 1981; Ejiofor 1981).

In the light of the present geo-political and administrative structure, the south-east zone of the country is the *Igbo* heartland, and is occupied by five states – Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo – while other fragments of the *Igbo* could be found in Rivers, Cross Rivers and Delta states of the Niger delta areas (Ibewuikwe 2006). The *Igbo* ethnic group, with a population of roughly between 24 and 25 million¹ people (CIA 2008), is one of the three major ethnic populations in Nigeria (Ifemesia 1979:15). For purposes of clarification, the *Igbo* in no sense comprised a homogenous social or political unit. According to Wolpe (1974:28), they had immigrated from over two hundred traditionally autonomous village groups that under the colonial system had been organised into no less than thirteen administrative sections...’ The diversity may seem minor but it is strong enough for a deserved mention here. However, as Emerson (1960:102) notes, in society there is down the scale a point at which people tend to stop and call themselves one. Thus, like most other ethnic groups in Nigeria and elsewhere, the many heterogeneous groups at some point got united as one ethnic group. Their oneness arose out of conditions of common traditions of origin, worldview, cultural features and ties, and as a result of practical and integrated coexistence over centuries.

Indeed, it is within this framework that this study must be understood to limit itself necessarily to a specific area of *Igbo*land, though the phenomenon being examined (the agencies and activism of ‘August Meeting’ groups) is somewhat truly universal to the entire *Igbo* ethnic group. The sub-ethnic group on which this study is focused is *Mbaise*, which is large and subsistent enough to support any form of scientific conclusions, comparative inductions, and deductions on the issues at stake. The name *Mbaise* is a combination of two *Igbo* words: *Mba*, which means community, society or group, and *ise*, which means ‘five’. Together the two words translate to “five communities”. *Mbaise* is located in Imo State, in the heart of *Igbo*land, south-eastern Nigeria. It is basically a colonial creation. The name ‘*Mbaise*’ means ‘five clans’, which was derived from the original five ‘native’ clans/communities that presently make up the sub-ethnic group. These include: *Agbaja*, *Oke-Ovuru*, *Ezi-na-Ihitte*, *Ahiara* and *Ekwereazu*. These were brought together by the British colonial administration for administrative purposes and convenience under the then *Owerri* Division. The history of the establishment of British authority in *Mbaise*, as in other parts of Nigeria, is basically the story of conquests and fusion.

Before 1902 when the Aro expedition was carried out by the British, Mbaise, as presently constituted, had not come into the British scheme of things (Odoemene 1997). But by 1905, the Ahiara Expedition had brought the full impact of British colonial control on the present Mbaise area. At the conclusion of the operation in April 1906, present-day Mbaise was effectively brought under Owerri jurisdictional authority. By 1945 the five clans were named 'Mba Ukwu' (big town), and six years later it was changed to Mbaise. Today Mbaise is made up of three local government areas: Ahiazu (which is a confederacy between Ahiara and Ekwerazu); Aboh Mbaise (product of a merger between Oke-Ovuru and Agbaja); and Ezinihitte. Largely a rural area, it had a total estimated population of about 423,000 people (NPC 1991) and its people are engaged in different professional and economic activities at home and abroad and are known for their industry, high literacy level, hospitality, high fertility, dense population, respect for elders and enviable cultural beliefs and practices (Nwokocha 2007:1-2).

What is the Public Sphere?

Most contemporary conceptualisations of the public sphere are based on the ideas expressed in Jürgen Habermas' book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere – An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (1989), which is an English translation of his original work in German published in 1962. In this book, the German term *Öffentlichkeit*, which means 'Public Sphere', encompasses a variety of meanings. It implies a spatial concept, the social sites or arenas where meanings are articulated, distributed and negotiated, as well as the collective body constituted by, and in this process, 'the public' (Negt and Kluge 1993). Fraser (1990:57) sees the public sphere as 'a site for the production and circulation of discourses that can in principle be critical of the State'. It has also been defined as an area in social life where people can get together and freely discuss and identify societal problems, and through that discussion influence political action (WFE 2008). Hauser (1998:86), on his part, perceives it as 'a discursive space in which individuals and groups congregate to discuss matters of mutual interest and, where possible, to reach a common judgment', while Asen (1999:117) understands it as 'a realm of social life in which public opinion can be formed'.

Despite its 'public' nature, this space mediates between the private/domestic sphere (comprising of the civil society) and the 'Sphere of Public Authority' (Habermas 1989:30), which is representative of the State and its apparatuses. Thus, the public sphere is conceptually distinct from the State but crossed over both the private/domestic realm and the realm of Public Authority and 'through the vehicle of public opinion it puts the State in touch

with the needs of society' (Habermas 1989:31). Therefore, a key feature of the public sphere was its separation from the power of both religion and government, which are domains dominated by the menfolk.

In these preceding definitions and descriptions of the public sphere some definitive words – people, social (but involving political participation/action), discourse and common concern – kept recurring. This shows their underlining importance in the character of what constitutes the public realm or sphere. From these one may, above all, conceive the public sphere as a theatre of private people who have come together as a public for political participation which is enacted through the medium of talk; and, as Fraser (1990:57) notes, it is also 'not an arena of market relations but rather one of discursive relations, a theatre for debating and deliberating rather than for buying and selling'. In *Rethinking the Public Sphere* (1990), Fraser revisits Habermas' (1989) historical description of the public sphere and confronts it with 'recent revisionist historiography'. In contrast to Habermas' (1989) assertions on disregard of status and inclusivity, Fraser (1990) claims that the public sphere, as propounded by Habermas, discriminated against, marginalised and excluded women and lower social strata of society. Nevertheless, she argues that marginalised groups formed their own public spheres, and termed this concept a *subaltern counterpublic* or counterpublics (Fraser 1990).

If one comes to think of them critically, the 'August Meeting' groups, to a very large extent, as shall be demonstrated later, cultivate and uphold most of the elements presented above as being germane to the public sphere: *private people (coming together and) having public socio-political participation/action involving discusses of common concern*. Fraser's (1990) later insights of the status of women in such an arrangement and her argument that these marginalised women formed their own public sphere are quite instructive, especially in relation to the agency and activism of 'August Meeting' groups. Indeed, the diversity of such women's groups spread across Igboland may have differed in the size and composition of their publics, the style of their proceedings, the climate of their debates, and their topical orientations; but they all organised discussion and deliberations among people on issues of common concern that tended to be ongoing. Hence, they had a number of institutional criteria in common, which also resemble the descriptions made on the public sphere.

The Igbo Public Sphere and the Place of Women

Since the landscape of any society worth its name cannot be adequately analysed without investigating the central place of women and the female principle in its social life, this section would critically examine the Igbo socio-

political landscape, deconstruct the 'public sphere' as against the 'domestic/private sphere' within this landscape, and evaluate the place, agency and community-sanctioned roles of women in a sphere.

The Igbo socio-political system has variously been expressed with terms like 'acephalous' and 'stateless' (Horton 1972), 'primary democracy' (Ejimofo 1979; Nwachukwu 1993), 'segmentary' and 'decentralised' (Imoagene 1990) and 'gerontocracy' (Onwuejeogwu 1981). The fact, thus, is that the Igbo society had 'varieties of political organisations...and each is completely capable in all ramifications of fulfilling all the functions of the society' (Nwachukwu 1993:45). These organisations were necessarily gendered, as Igbo society was (and still is) not gender-neutral in the allocation of roles – social, economic and political (Anyanwu 1993:113), though role differentiation was relatively limited or 'silenced'. With this kind of socio-political system among the Igbo, as in some other African societies, where non-state forms of socio-political organisation predominate, politics, economics and social life are fused into a single societal whole.

Thus, the control and socialisation functions, most commonly designated as political functions, are conducted by and through non-political structures. Thus, analysts who more frequently dealt with societies in which there were differentiated socio-political structures were unlikely to find the paradigms they usually found in some other societies, or they may not have found them in recognisable forms in 'traditional' societies. Consequently, since they tended not to examine the non-political roles women played, they were unaware of the consequences of these activities in societies where politics is fused with other aspects of social life. There is need, therefore, to make a very vital clarification on the status of women in traditional Igbo society, especially with regard to the public sphere.

Historically, Igbo people have been predisposed to democratic and egalitarian social arrangements, which accorded women a degree of autonomy. Women's participation in the Igbo socio-political organisation and public sphere was largely ensured through the 'dual-sex political system'. Each sex generally managed its own affairs and had its own kinship institutions, age grades, and secret and title societies (Afigbo 1972; Agara-Houessou-Adin 1998) through which it exerted some influence in society. This dual-sex political system 'allowed women and men to carry out their responsibilities without infringing on the others' territory' (Okonjo 1976:45) and having distinct lives of their own. Hence, through this system, which was commonly accepted by the whole community, women were actively involved in all the socio-political activities of their communities (Uchendu 1993). But this was limited to some degree; for while as individuals, Igbo women accounted very little,² as a

group they were politically important and relevant in the scheme of things. Indeed, the 'dual-sex political system' also had inherent checks and balances, which maintained a subtle balance of gender power before colonial policies upset the system and relegated the women to an inferior position vis-à-vis the men.

The intriguing question then becomes: What is associated with the active participation of women in the public sphere in contemporary Igboland? No single answer suffices as the Igbo culture area could be said to be one with a seemingly 'contested history' of female marginal space as well as feminist assertiveness. These two main views dominate the intellectual discourse on the place of women in Igbo public sphere. The first is that Igbo women were inferior to, marginalised, dominated and indeed oppressed by the menfolk, and existed only to do the bidding of men. Thus, politically, the Igbo world was essentially the man's (Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974; Ottenberg 1962; Dine 1983). This essentially throws up the arguments of Beauvoir's (1980) 'Otherness' theory of the objectification of women in a world where men constitute the centre and the standard for analysis. This theory clarifies the predicament of women in the social, political and cultural life in terms of their marginalisation and construction as inferior reflections of the standard which is male: woman as man's inferior 'Other' – the central/marginal, standard/other dichotomy (Okafor 2002:2).

Thus, as opposed to the man's world, there exists the 'other world' – the 'world of women' or what Okafor (2002) has rightly termed *Uwa Umu-nwanyi*. In her analysis of Beauvoir's (1980) 'Otherness', Okafor (2002) argues that *Uwa Umu-nwanyi* is comparable, though not analogous, to it through its expression of difference and marginality. 'Otherness' is, therefore, not alien to their articulation of gender because the women have developed expressions (verbal and non-verbal) for defining separate subordinated selves, such as with the expression, *Uwa Umu-nwanyi* – a term that signifies separation from the main (public) stream which is male (Okafor 2002:2). *Uwa Umu-nwanyi* (which could also sometimes translate to 'women's lot') is not usually harped on, but surfaces and resurfaces (sometimes sounding like a refrain) in moments of women's feeling of relegation generated when events and situations become gender-oppressive.

Indeed, *Uwa Umu-nwanyi* articulates gender objectification and relegation, and 'expresses' without offering any explanation for the relegation, and encodes separateness, not on the horizontal level of equivalence but on the vertical gradation in which women occupy the lower level as well as the spherical in which they occupy the margins. However, it is not just a verbal expression or statement of resignation, but also a revolt and an empowering

agent. Its expression of resistance lies in its definition of positionality, recognition of separateness, unfairness, and oppositional stance against what it defines, just as the space it provides makes for the articulation of strategy and campaign against its existence (Okafor 2002:5). However, though this women's world in the margin – in the public sphere – constitutes a subversive space for campaign against marginalisation, this space has not been used adequately to restructure women's situation/plight. Perhaps contemporary agencies of these women, as shown in such activities as the 'August Meeting', are possibilities of the expression of diverse strategies within this empowering space in tackling the layered relegation of contemporary Igbo, nay African women.

The second view stresses quite the opposite. In this perception, women are credited with immense power which they use in control of the men. In other words, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, this view believes that women's power subdued the menfolk, and men did women's bidding. Van Allen (1972), Collier (1974) and Chinweizu (1991), among others, are proponents of this view. In a theoretical discussion of women's place and roles in society, Collier (1974) shows that women are purposeful social and political actors in whose activities one can find patterns and regularities. She argues that 'such regularities cannot be explained by looking at moral injunctions or jural rules, both of which stress woman's subservient positions, but become intelligible only if women are seen as actors whose efforts to control the social environment are channelled by cultural rules, by available resources and the choices of others within the social system' (Collier 1974:90).

In Igbo communities, women had meetings or assemblies of their own, and such congregations have been rightly emphasised as the base of women's political power (Van Allen 1972) in traditional Igboland. Women's formal leadership roles by which they became politically significant in Igbo traditional communities were at two interrelated levels: the *Umuada* and the *Otu Alutaradi*.³ The former refers to exogamous union of daughters married away to other villages but retain their ties with their communities of birth, while the later refers to that of wives of the men in the village who have come from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds (Green 1964:216, 232). Corroborating this fact, Wolpe (1974:35) also aptly notes that '...women (especially among the Ibo [sic] formed societies based upon membership not only in the villages into which they were married, but also in those into which they were born'. Dine (1983:130) also aptly asserts that '...Both groups maintain order and promote life and bring consolidation, joy and solidarity among themselves and to the village community.' Thus, these

women's associations, which had pre-colonial and ancient roots, indeed gave Igbo women strong and powerful political voices and symbols.

Another pre-colonial socio-political institution among the Igbo that recognised the worth of women was the village assembly, which was open to all adults who chose to come and participate. Indeed, this institution epitomised the Igbo public sphere and the matters discussed in this arena concerned everyone. Though it has been observed that men were more likely to speak than women in this gathering, older women frequently spoke out and were respected – age being the one factor which mitigates sex differences (Friedl 1975). The leaders in the village assembly were certainly both men and women who, above all, had the ability to speak well. Similarly and interestingly, in a commissioned study following the Women's Riots (War?) of 1929, anthropologist Margaret M. Green studied the power of women in an Igbo village. Her findings showed the *Otu Alutaradi* provided women with collective bargaining power to safeguard against excesses of male dominance and to deal with men who jeopardised women's interests (Green 1964:169).

Again, in a critical appraisal of the interrelations between the domestic/private and the public spheres, it would not be difficult for one to see the significant contributions and agencies of women in the sphere considered to be in the public domain. For instance, by lending support to the events in the domestic sphere, which is largely the sphere of women, Igbo women usually set the parameters of what is possible in the public sphere. In addition to being part of the process which sets the parameters of public life, women operate as political strategists within the family, the neighbourhood, as well as among their female kin.

The two views suggest that there was considerable antagonism (rivalry or struggle, as opposed to cooperation and collaboration) between the respective roles of males and females in the Igbo political system. This characterisation is, however, thought to be artificial and untrue of the situation in the socio-political life of the Igbo (Anyanwu 1993). The first impression of gender relations and roles in Igboland is very faulty. Anyanwu (1993:115) notes that though 'men were much in the limelight in the structural and institutional organs associated with Igbo political life, the visibility (involvement) of men, no matter how over-whelming it appeared, was not designed or aimed at achieving the invisibility (non-involvement) of women' in Igbo society. He explains further that:

...right from the beginnings, Igbo theory of life reckoned with the positive value of the input of females for the achievement of desired goals... The male-female visibility or participation in each aspect of Igbo life and culture was such that stressed the inevitability of the value of both sexes (Anyanwu 1993:115-116).

This argument is buttressed by accounts like those of Okonjo (1976), Ekejiuba (1966) and Amadiume (1987), which indicate institutionalised and regular participation of women in the political organisation of some Igbo communities. Similarly, some other Igbo scholars such as Afigbo (1990), Ezumah (1988) and Chinweizu (1991) have also demonstrated unambiguously that this position is true of the entire Igbo cultural area. Achebe (2005) also agrees with a categorization of socio-political organisation in Igboland by those historians who argue that a dual-sex political system, in which power and authority were divided between the sexes in a complementary fashion, was operational. In the 'village assembly' – a gathering of all adults where matters of concern to all in the village were discussed – any adult who had something to say on the matter under discussion was entitled to speak, as long as he or she said something the others considered worth listening to (Van Allen 1972; Harris 1940; Uchendu 1993:42-43). Meek (1937:203) and Uchendu (1993:41), however, note that men almost always had the upper hand in such gatherings. But this seems to have been the case in the pre-colonial era; a lot had changed since then.

Indeed, pre-colonial traditional Igbo egalitarian political institutions accorded women more integral roles than exist now. This has been adequately dealt with by many pre-colonial Igbo scholars (Afigbo 1981, 1990; Amadiume 1987a/b; Ekejiuba 1990; Green 1964; Njoku 1974; Ogbalu 1973; Ottenberg 1962; Uchendu 1965; Van Allen 1972); and indicates that the seeming silencing of women's voice and the limiting of their exercise of leadership, as observed in many Igbo communities today, are not intrinsic to Igbo culture. It is the aftermath of the introduction of 'de-womanising' colonial policies and medieval Western Christian notions of women's inferiority into Nigeria by British colonizers, Christian missionaries, and the Nigerian male elite favoured by the change.

Many present-generation Igbo have no memory of these pre-colonial empowering traditions. Consequently, they oppose change and wrongly accuse Igbo women who resist male oppression of not knowing their culture or of having lost it through exposure to the Euro-American women's movement (Uchem 2003:46). Unfortunately, the seeming invisibility of women in the public sphere in most communities is only reinforced by the prevalent scholarly engagements which, inadvertently or not, have largely ignored women and their activities in research and, consequently, in literature (O'Barr 1975:19). The invisibility of women in scholarly engagements, especially in the social sciences, stems from the traditional concerns and emphases of such disciplines which, in turn, are largely influenced by Western notions and approaches. Indeed, nowhere is this neglect or insensitivity more obviously

the case than in Africa, where the political clout of African women has been overlooked, just as has been their impact in their own society.

The 'August Meeting': Evolutionary Trends in Historical Perspective

A prominent pre-colonial traditional women's group among the Igbo is the *Otu Alutaradi*. This group is made up of all wives who were married into the lineage, village and/or community from different communities and, sometimes, ethno-cultural groups. In other words, it is a group based on the place of marriage – an association that represents the married women in a giving community. Although Igbo women in this group maintained close links with their natal villages and communities, they usually participated in this group for their social activities in their husband's home (Ibewuiké 2006:70). This helped to strengthen cohesion and co-operation among the married women, who were a collection of individuals born elsewhere. *Otu Alutaradi* had different modes of operation and, indeed, mandate, which was different from other women's groups in each setting. They held occasional meetings to address day-to-day concerns of the married women in the community (Ibewuiké 2006) and were 'participants in the political affairs of the town...' (Uchendu 1993:26), while providing the members with the much needed support while they would be far away from their natal communities. This group was especially effective and well known for disciplining their fellow women. In many places they tried other women for stealing; or committing adultery or having sexual relations with their brothers-in-law or with *Osu* (an outcast); or for even speaking lightly to men about matters of childbirth; or for listening to the conversation of a husband with a co-wife at night (Meek 1937:201).

One may be piqued to ask: Why is this women's group (*Otu Alutaradi*) significant to the present study? Where and what is the relationship with the 'August Meeting'? Indeed, the present group is germane to our present study. It should be mentioned that *Otu Alutaradi* is the forerunner and antecedent-basis of the present 'August Meeting' groups in Igboland. The transformation of *Otu Alutaradi* to the 'August Meeting' could be traced back to the massive urbanisation which, during the colonial period, hit the Igbo social space as it did most other parts of what is Nigeria today. This mass urbanisation led to the opening up of such urban centres as Enugu, Port Harcourt, Umuahia, Onitsha, Aba, Owerri, Calabar and so on in the south-eastern parts, following the trends witnessed in the cases of Lagos, Ibadan, Kano, Kaduna and elsewhere. This 'opening up' of these various towns and cities led to a dramatic, drastic and massive rural-urban migration, which saw the

movement of thousands of people from the rural communities to the newly emergent urban centres at the time. Away from home, these migrants established various ethnic (homeland) associations or unions in a bid to provide some socio-economic security to the urban migrants against the exigencies of urban life, and also to keep in constant touch with the rural hometowns from where each of them had migrated. Mabogunje (1976:23) sheds more light on this:

...perhaps the most important ... in many African cities is the ethnic or town association. This consists of people who have migrated from the same ethnic group or the same area. These associations perform a variety of functions which have come to cover large areas of life of many migrants. They serve as a reception body to welcome the new migrant to the city. They help him [sic] to find accommodation and very often too, to find employment.

In other words, migrants to these urban centres had different strong umbrella ethnic and sub-ethnic unions according to where they came from, which were fashioned to deal with the problems of urban existence as they affect their members. The existence of such societies could be explained in terms of the consequence of the weakening of the role of the family, nuclear and/or extended, in the provision of needed security to its members, due to the requirements of migration and the new urban milieu. Thus, their functions were primarily to guarantee the adequate welfare and security of their members in the city (Mabogunje 1976). Hence, they undertook and performed the task of integrating new migrants, who decided to join of their own volition, into urban life and society (Mabogunje 1976; Osaghae 1994). Most of the sub-ethnic associations (under the main ethnic umbrella) had such prefixes or suffixes as 'Improvement Unions', 'Development Associations', 'Progressive Unions', 'Family Meeting' and so on. They usually held meetings once every month in the urban centres of their residence, unless there was an emergency that called for an impromptu assemblage. As is usually the case in most Igbo traditional communities, men and women in these associations usually had their meetings separately, though at the same day, time and venue.⁴

Membership of the umbrella ethnic union, like the Igbo State Union, or Igbo Unions, as it came to be known later, was based on membership of sub-ethnic unions, like the Mbaise Assembly or Orlu Improvement Union and so on. Furthermore, the membership of the sub-ethnic unions was based on membership of smaller hometown or village associations. Since an important aspect of this development was that these associations were also in constant contact with their rural homelands and communities, this was

made effective and possible through the hometown or village associations. Through these contacts, there developed an 'urban-rural linkage for development', especially for the interest of the rural communities and dwellers. The meeting fashioned out for the 'union' of the urban-based hometown associations and their rural counterparts became known in Igboland as the 'Home and Abroad Meeting'.⁵ This meeting, which was held in most, if not all, Igbo communities, was convened once a year, usually in the month of December, and involved both the men and women of all such communities. The meetings dealt with issues of development and 'progress' in the rural communities, and undertook various developmental projects in such communities. The 'Home and Abroad Meeting', which was truly the forerunner of the present-day 'August Meeting', was very popular among the Igbo from the early 1920s and thrived on up to the mid-1980s. With time, the women in the 'Home and Abroad Meeting' started having their own gatherings at a different time and venue from the men.

...the Home and Abroad Meeting...has actually stopped and they now settled for 'August Meeting' only. But the meeting of women has not suffered in any way. For instance, women at home usually met from time to time to deliberate on the affairs of the community. Then during 'August Meeting', they relate to the *Abroadians* what has been going on at the home [rural] front (Uwalaka 2006:PC).

The 'August Meeting', as presently held among the Igbo, began about the late 1980s and has since assumed permanence. It is thought to have been started by women's groups in the old Anambra State within the Igbo homeland for community development purposes, but was soon adopted or borrowed by many other surrounding Igbo societies. In other words, the 'August Meeting' spread across Igboland by the soliciting of women from many other communities to be like their colleagues in Anambra State, and the aim was to organise women and develop the community by bringing in some 'progress' through development projects in the rural communities. As Nwachukwu (2006:PC) notes:

'August Meeting' was borrowed from other communities, particularly from the Anambra State region. It is new in our land. It is a gathering where married woman [sic] of particular communities come together to deliberate on some issues for the peace and wellbeing of their communities. They always see to the development of their rural communities. For example, drilling of boreholes, building and/or renovating of market squares, renovation of schools and hospitals, etc. Again, it aims at bringing them home to see each others [sic] which foster peace and progress in a community.

Furthermore, and more convincing of not only the fact of its recent developments in some parts of Igboland, but also of the fact that it was indeed an adopted tradition, Ekwonye (2007:PC) opines:

At a time, we were not doing it and all other communities around were then. Our women now came together to agree on bringing it to Otulu Amumara. And as soon as we got information and directives from Aba, we immediately started the meeting. The origin of the meeting is something I can't explain very much, but I know someone established it somewhere else and we all adopted it because we found it good. It is actually a borrowed culture.

The basis on which these women organise themselves is the village, community or hometown associations based in the different cities and towns within and outside the country. For instance, these women attend the meetings as 'members/delegates of Aba branch' or those of Lagos branch or Kano branch and so forth, of the different hometown unions. In other words, the various members/delegates from these different places congregate to form the 'August Meeting'. No town or city, or indeed woman, wishes to be left out in the roll-call as women troop to their marital rural hometowns from diverse Nigerian social spaces to attend the meetings. In fact, many also fly in from Europe, the Americas, Asia and other parts of the world to be counted among its participants.

This now-famous 'grand', august annual congress, which lasts for days, has the same particular meaning, characteristics and appeal all over Igboland. During this period, the urban-dwelling women, uniting with the rural-dwelling women, organise themselves, discuss and deliberate on issues that affect them commonly and bring up suggestions/ideas on how to tackle or solve the different problems confronting their 'marital communities'. Thus, the broad purpose is to help in the advancement of the good of the womenfolk and the entire community in general. The dates and venues for the meetings are fixed by the women for varying durations and to suit their own convenience, such that the whole month of August is usually a beehive of activities for the women (Ifedigbo 2008). Usually, the main reason for the meetings is for the purposes of raising funds for different community development projects. These development projects can be either their own initiatives or those of their male counterparts – their husbands.

It would be safe, therefore, for one to conceptualise the 'August Meeting' as more or less an annual reunion, congress or convocation of Igbo hometown women, for deliberations and consultations on their responsibilities, and the possible roles they could play in problem-solving and community development. In terms of the groups' organisation, one would observe that the 'August

Meeting' groups are usually well organised. They usually have all the executive members a normal association is meant to have – the Chairlady, Vice-Chairlady, Secretary, Treasurer, Financial Secretary, Provost, etc. (Ugboaja 2006:PC). In some communities, these women's groups have also developed some kind of a strategic group for 'community policing' of their towns, especially for the sake of peace and tranquillity within their communities. Underlining the eligibility of the women participants in terms of their marital status, Ifedigbo (2008) observes that 'participation is the exclusive reserve of married women...' Further commenting on the nature of the groups' membership, Acho (2006:PC) notes that:

The entire women married into a community, no matter where they are, in or outside their communities. Even foreigners, like a European woman from overseas can be a member; provided the person has been married into that particular community, she will be a part of the "August Meeting".

On the choice of the month for the hosting of the annual ritual, Onuoha (2006:PC) argues that the month of August was chosen for these meetings because by that time the agrarian activities are less among the Igbo, thus affording opportunities for 'all' (women) to attend. Ugboaja (2006:PC), on the other hand, believes this choice was influenced by certain occasions like the new yam festival, which is widely celebrated in the month of August among the Igbo. Thus, the women use the opportunity of the festival for their congress, while the larger congress with the men is still held in December, the month for the usual Christmas home-coming. Thus, in every month of August, Igbo women from all nook and cranny of the country and beyond troop back to their communities of marriage for this all-important development-related congress. Pointing out the place of this women's gathering in Igbo society, Nwaoko (2007:13) opines:

It is now commonplace to see large groups of predominantly female Igbos [sic] travelling home in the month of August. The big cities feel the absence of "Ndi nne mama" when it is time for "August Meeting". The marked difference between this and the Christmas exodus of Igbo people to their towns and villages, is that only businesses run by the women – and there are so many of them – are the ones that close throughout the duration of the women's absence for the meeting. ...Several communities understandably plan some of their annual communal activities to fall within the meeting period. This affords them the opportunity of making the best use of the presence of their daughters and daughters-in-law abroad. And the meetings turn out to be quite desirable as the various communities usually benefit in one way or the other from the various initiatives the women groups bring home from their various places of abode.

Ugboaja (2006:PC) also adds another clarifying dimension to this activity:

The "August Meeting" is not done only in the community but in the churches too. When they [the women] are done with the community meetings, they go over to the church according to their denomination to discuss and organise things there too and see how they can help in moving things forward their [sic]. So it is not only a community affair; there is also a religious angle to the groups' activities.

Agency and Activism in Social-Political Life

A good starting point would be the interrogation of the groups' mandate and duties. An interesting highlight of the groups' mandate could be deciphered from the synonym for the 'August Meeting' group in Otulu Amumara (in Mbaise): *Udo na Oganihu* (Ekwonye 2007:PC), which means 'Peace and Progress (or development)'. This indeed underscores the dual mandate of this group. These groups have one basic objective: to give a meaning to life, especially for the rural dwellers where their projects are usually cited (Onuoha 2006:PC; Nweke 2006:PC). The meetings are also seen and later used as avenues of discussing other social problems being encountered in the society, especially as most Igbo communities are witnessing social conflicts and contestations that are tearing the social fabric apart. Anamelechi (2006:PC) further elaborates on these, noting distinctly the reason for the groups' 'encroachment' into other areas of endeavour, distinct from their original objective:

"August Meeting" was purely for development purposes, and it's also the same now.... Primarily, it's for community development, but at times such organisations co-opt some other functions that were not initially part of their original objectives, due to the exigencies of the time. That was exactly what happened in the "August Meeting" case. These women saw the need to intervene in the various societal conflicts – within the family, kindred, village and community, and so they got involved... So, in actual fact, they initially set out as development-oriented groups which would only be involved in the execution of development projects in the communities, but eventually veered off into other equally important areas of endeavour, such as conflict resolution and management, peace-building, skills acquisition/training and women development through education.

Among the Igbo, the initiation and success of development efforts is largely dependent on the ordinary people, on women and men, and mainly through self-help projects. Development programmes of all kinds affect women and are affected by them, though social analysts have until recently overlooked women's role in such endeavours. As O'Barr (1975:20) aptly noted some

two and a half decades ago, 'development' may be more dependent on females than males in decades ahead. Indeed, this is largely true of the Igbo case. The willingness of families and communities to undertake projects which lie at the grass roots of development are dependent on the people, and mostly the women. In many cases, funds to execute these projects are raised during the August meetings through fund-raising launchings.

These women do so many things. For example, they dig wells or sink boreholes in communities that lack pipe-borne water and construct roads. They rehabilitate dilapidated hospitals/maternity centres, community/town halls, schools and/or libraries or build new ones. They also embark on electrification or water projects, endow scholarships for indigent children of fellow members, settle quarrels in/among members' families, visit charitable homes with gift items, put in place skills acquisition centres for the jobless and less-privileged, and undertake many more such activities (Ugboaja 2006:PC; Onuoha 2006:PC; Nweke 2006:PC; Anamelechi 2006:PC). Indeed, these projects are extant in most of these communities till date. In another vein, women participate in *Esusu* (thrift collection and management) and microfinance ventures, while experts among them organise seminars and workshops to engage in and/or teach the rest of the women issues related to the improvement of womanhood, reproductive health, the family and community at large – such as those on menopause, family planning, conflict management and peace-building, small-scale farming and industry systems, and many others.

August meetings groups also serve as agents of social control and safeguards of 'tradition' in Igbo rural communities, thus entrenching peace and social wellbeing among the people. Indeed, no one, male or female, is spared by them in their exercise of 'social control' in their society. Different stories of people sent into 'exile' (both permanent and temporary), cases of ostracism and 'community divorce' enforced by these groups exist in most Igbo communities. Two cases would suffice and are relived here:

There was this woman that was really misbehaving here [in the community]. She was very rude to everyone, especially to the husband. She was really misbehaving and committing abominations. After series of appeals, confrontations and admonitions and she did not want to change her ways, these women ["August meetings" group] struck. They brought a pick-up van, packed all her belongings and took her to her father's house. She has not come back. And she will never come back. Never. ... You know it is an act of communal condemnation and carries a heavy curse with it. The same goes for anyone in the community who steals or commits adultery or other anti-social acts that we abhor (Ugboaja 2006:PC).

Uchechukwu's (2001:3) ardent observation of the workings of these women is quite revealing of the general trends of their collective agency:

I suddenly heard the sound of a gong, followed by the voice of a woman shouting: "*Inyom Nimo, onye nu' ya gwa ibe ya*", which means, "Nimo women, she who hears should tell the next person". She simply continued beating the gong and repeating this statement. I drew my mother's attention to the fact that the woman had not yet passed on a definite message that should be conveyed to others. She [the mother] said the message had been conveyed. As if to confirm her words, lots of women started tramping down the path the messenger had taken. The long and short of it was that the women were being called to come and beat up a man that had been mishandling the wife for some time. On such occasions no man goes to assist the particular man whose house is besieged. Unfortunately, the man that had this December visit simply ran away, even though he was a wealthy man. The women came back and started making other plans.

One interesting point to note about these women's agencies and activism is that, sometimes, these are bold steps into areas hitherto thought to be exclusive to men. Of particular mention here would be the undertaking of such development projects that were seen as men's domain, especially in the areas of conflict management and peace-building. This is not to say that women have not been in these areas; but to emphasise that with the loss of women's pre-colonial socio-political status, ventures into such areas are nothing but remarkably significant and must be seen as such. It should also be noted that these women's groups are separated and autonomous from men's groups, but not totally insulated from their influences and contributions. After all, as Ekwonye (2006:PC) puts it, 'they are our husbands, brothers and fathers; they are also partners in progress with us. So, there is no way they would not have a say, somehow, in things we undertake.' For instance, notes Acho (2006:PC), 'all of the projects undertaken by us (as "August Meeting" groups) get fully supported by our husbands. They are critical to the success of such projects, both financially and logistically. We are wives and not owners of the land where we seek to develop, thus, not *on our own*. So, we always count on them. But for our deliberations and decisions, they do not come in at all.'

All these said, there is need to underline some clarification of the political posturing of these women groups in Igboland. Politically, the groups do not get affiliated with any political group; and the members do not participate in politics as a group. Individually, the groups' members can and do join politics. Of course, there are no laws or rules against individual members' participation in politics. Such individual members can also ask their group members to

support them to be elected to political office; but the members cannot offer their support as groups, but as individuals. Since they are non-political, the 'August Meeting' groups do not tolerate support for political organisations.

Some Criticisms and Challenges

The history of the 'August Meeting' among Igbo women shows that it has not always been a smooth story to tell about its conduct, activities and achievements. Nor has its convocation been without the normal challenges and difficulties that have confronted such gatherings in recent times. Indeed, there were issues of conflict generation and/or escalation that were attributed to the group in various parts of Igboland. The initial branding of this annual congress as 'evil', 'wasteful' and 'chauvinistic' (probably due to its presumed feminist posture) was a major setback in the proper rooting of this ideal at the time. Similarly, its unacceptability and boycott by most Pentecostal-based church members and the indifference shown by some others posed yet another set of problems which, to an extent, militated against the proper functioning of the group in parts of Igboland.

The first criticism this women's annual re-union faced, and still faces, is that it is a mere 'fashion show' for women of class to showcase their husbands' affluence, or indeed, theirs. Mgbeahurika (2008) introduces this month or period as that '...characterised by ostentatious show of wealth'. He further notes that:

...it behoves men in the East whose wives are members to buy the latest fabric for them. Unfortunately, husbands who could not make their wives look important during "August Meeting" are seen, most times, to be *Efulufu* (worthless persons). Their wives would deride them. So men also prepare big for their wives to stave off the shame.

Anamelechi (2006:PC) points to this fact as underlining the groups' propensity for conflict generation, especially at the family level, in Igbo communities:

...there was a time women were coming to the meeting to show off their husbands' wealth...men were then going to take loans to buy new clothes for their wives for the "August Meeting", and if they (their husbands) do [sic] not provide them, this meant big problems in their families. Many of these families broke up on account of this trend.

Without a doubt, the annual gathering at 'that time' shifted from being an issue-oriented one and a conscious effort at community building, to one in which married Igbo women from all over the world flocked back home to

what could best be termed a 'big jamboree'. For instance, Ifedigbo (2008) notes the attitude of these women, especially the *abroadians* to the congress:

The abroad women carried themselves with an air, stamping their superiority to the home-based women and it was a thing of pride for every home-based granny to have an abroad daughter-in-law who she showed off at the August Meeting... Women who did not turn out in their best or whose best was not good enough i.e. did not meet the prevailing standard, were treated as second class and their opinion in the meeting was more often than not disregarded.

A discussant also put the searchlight on this issue:

Most of these women see the 'August Meeting' as an avenue to show off the contents of their wardrobes and to make a statement with their presence. The meeting is more like a fashion show or a parade where women involved show off, even borrow clothes and accessories. They just go there to gossip and quarrel over non-issues. That is not why they are there... We have heard severally of their problems... (Male Youth FGD Respondent).

Another representative perception of 'August Meeting' groups holds thus:

'August Meeting', to me is a forum where women gather to show off the latest attires. I may be wrong, but this is just what I feel. Many women look forward to it from that angle and not even from the angle of what they are going to offer [to their communities]. They go there to share gossips and all that. Trust women. I have not heard of anything tangible they have done in my own community. Like I said, I may be wrong. Maybe, if I join them, I can tell exactly what they go there to do... On a soft side, I hear they give soft loans to their members to engage in one trade or the other and scholarships to bright children from poor families. These are good. I also hear that they can settle quarrels between their members and within members' families. Well, if those are true, that's OK (Agbareruleke 2008:PC).

Though this respondent, it should be observed, seemingly speaks from a point of 'ignorance' about the activities of the 'August Meeting' groups, her perspectives are quite enriching, fresh and significant. Indeed, it highlights aspects of these women's creative initiative, particularly in helping fellow women achieve economic independence, through the introduction of the micro-credit schemes among members and helping indigent families in training their children by offering scholarships. The dimensions and significance of these to family stability, entrepreneurship and the entrenchment of peace in communities, especially among rural dwellers, cannot be overemphasised.

This 'fashion show' accusations against 'August Meeting' groups, however, seems to have been the position in the past, as many of the women interviewed pointed out. Some clarifications were also made:

...it was the materialistic women amongst them who felt it was a period of fashion show...But this problem has been solved with the introduction of uniforms for the meeting. [Thus,] there is no need for one to say I don't have new sets of wrapper or head scarves; for that, I am not going for 'August Meeting' this year. And there is no reason for families to be in chaos because a woman wants to go for 'August Meeting' (Uwalaka 2006:PC).

Attesting to this development in the 'August Meeting', Ekwonye (2007:PC) also shows how it has been successfully managed in her own case, which is also reflective of the position in many other Igbo communities. She notes thus:

...when I took over as the women's leader I stopped all that because I found out that some were really using that opportunity to intimidate and oppress others who do not have and also cause problems in the family, especially between wives and husbands who could not provide for their wives. Some women even stopped coming for meetings because they could not afford big wrappers, laces and head scarves for meetings. So, seeing all these, I introduced the uniform thing into our fold which I believe has solved that problem.

Some women, in some other given instances, are known to have sunk all their savings into preparations for the meetings, thus leaving their families even poorer. Abonyi (2008:PC) believes that these challenges occur because 'August Meeting', as currently practised in most Igbo communities, 'has grossly deviated from the purpose for which they were initially formed'. In consequence, instead of these women coming back from the meetings better equipped to face their roles as mothers and wives, most of them have been found to be more vain, emptier and materialistic with no evidence of improvement; developments that have made some men to literarily 'ban' their wives from attending any such meetings (Abonyi 2008:PC).

An interesting angle was even canvassed by some who held 'hard views' on the 'August Meeting'. For them, the 'August Meeting' groups are merely a further and 'covert' extension of 'patriarchy' and male domination. In line with this pattern of thought, a respondent notes thus: 'However you look at it, these women only do the bidding of the men who act behind. Their decisions are most times men-induced' (Eberechukwu 2008:PC). Ogbenyealu (2008:PC) further corroborates this theory of patriarchal extension, pointing out that '...these groups are made up of women who are married and so, true to our African tradition, first loyalty will always be to their husbands'.

There is also a seeming boycott of the 'August Meeting' by Pentecostal Church members, who see it as not conforming with their core beliefs and practices as 'born-again Christians'. This has actually led to some divisions and disaffections in some Igbo communities. The argument against these Christian sects' position and actions on the 'August Meeting' and its activities is that at the end of the day these 'born-again Christians' will very much benefit from whatever development project is initiated or carried out by the women's group, as there is no way they could be excluded from these gains. Thus, the bulk of the women involved in the 'August Meeting' and their various projects are mainly those of the Catholic, Anglican, Apostolic, Methodist and Presbyterian denominations. Hence, this development is a significant drawback to the 'August Meeting' activities in rural communities of Igboland.

Finally, and very soothing for this section, the admonishment of Chief (Mrs.) Comfort Chukwu to women during the 2008 'August Meeting' reunions also lays credence to challenges the groups faced. On the flip side, however, her advice also underlines the opportunities availed by the 'August Meeting':

I want to encourage you not to use your positions to cause disaffection in your various communities. I also urge you to desist from picking quarrels with the traditional rulers and town union executives, I encourage you to make sure that you actually use the opportunity offered by 'August Meeting' to bring peace, unity, and development to your various communities and not to use the occasion to pursue matters that are inimical to the purpose and principles of the meeting... This will go a long way in restoring the dignity of womanhood and give women a pride of place in the scheme of things (cit. Mgbeahurika 2008).

Conclusion

This article has highlighted the following: what constitutes the public sphere; the place of women in Igbo public sphere; the historical developments of 'August Meeting' groups in Igboland; the (re)venturing of these women's groups into the public sphere and some of the groups' drawbacks. From these, the evidence that Igbo women have significantly entered into various and diverse realms of the public sphere, which were hitherto considered exclusive to men, have been carefully articulated. This, they have done, through the community development initiatives of the 'August Meeting' groups, whose roles are not restricted to *women's affairs* only, but involve interventions in all matters of interest to their traditional community. These 'August Meeting' women's groups have been phenomenal as much as they

have been radical in the pursuit of the mandates. Similarly, decisions taken at these women's assemblies were implemented not only on the surface to secure or serve women's interest, but in reality, to protect the total interest of the traditional communities involved. Thus, their contributions have been, to say the least, very enormous and encouraging, but have also simultaneously elicited both commendations and condemnations from the public.

The contributions of these 'August Meeting' women's groups to societal development have, however, not been without some major challenges. A major challenge has been the lack of the needed full support from all segments of the society, which is very essential for their success. This has been due to lack of proper understanding of the mandate and activities of the groups by some sections of the public, and the groups' overzealous actions in certain matters. Another setback to these women groups' realization of their overall potential was the challenge posed by illiteracy. A majority of the members of the 'August Meeting' groups, especially those who were rural-based, were not 'literate' in the Western sense of the word, and this seriously limited their capacity to perform optimally, especially in this 'age'. Because we all are members of a rapidly changing world, especially in terms of culture and traditions, 'August Meeting' groups should be encouraged to accommodate useful suggestions, innovations and ideas that could ultimately lead to further positive transformations of the groups and the society. Indeed, there is an urgent need for the sustenance of these women's groups, at least for the strengthening of social cohesion and entrenchment of sustainable traditional values which are embodied in them. These are critical for the society's healthy development.

Though many of these groups in different communities could be seen or said to have, at one time or the other, deviated from their society-sanctioned goals, this does not translate into actual derailment of the groups, or their vision and purposes. As Mgbeahurika (2008) notes clearly, 'even though the women display wealth', which borders on one of the criticisms and challenges they face, 'they also record a lot of tangible things during such meetings'. The purpose of going home to gather is primarily to build a united family front – they deliberate on various issues relating to peace, harmony, unity and development in the various communities. Undeniably, the idea behind the 'August Meeting' concept is superb and its practice has been largely a success story and a lesson on the participation of women in the stimulation of communal growth, especially at the rural levels. 'August Meeting' associations have come to stay in Igbo society, not just as groups of mothers and wives, but also as watchdogs, guardians and development partners in the rural settings. It remains, however, for these groups to properly blossom and

occupy significant niches in the socio-economic development and transformation of the Igbo nation and Nigeria at large.

These women's initiatives, agencies and successes in the traditional settings point to one fact: their continued exclusion in matters of community development at the wider societal levels (national and international) is uncalled-for, truly regrettable and unsustainable. Time has come for women to be included in such vital areas, as they have proven their mettle over the years. They should no more be considered as partners who contribute to positive transformations, as they have been doing for years in the Igbo rural settings. One thing, however, that is strange, at least to core Igbo practices, is the taxonomy – 'August Meeting'. That this gathering of Igbo women has not come to be known by any local name in Igboland over the years is, indeed, surprising and a rather strange development. But, in a way, it also demonstrates the uniqueness of this gathering and, probably, Igbo receptivity to change and socio-cultural hybridisation.

Notes

1. Sources vary widely about the Igbo population: Mushanga (2001:166) puts Igbo population at 'over 20 million'; Okafor (2004:86) argues it to be 'about twenty-five million' (25 million); Okpala (2003:21) says 'around 30 million'; while Smith (2004:508) notes it to be 'approximately 20 million'. Unfortunately, the last country-wide census exercise in Nigeria (in 2007) was quite controversial and did not inquire into the ethnic origins of its citizens; thus, its figures are certainly not reliable for this study.
2. Except among the western Igbo (Ika-Igbo) including the Onitsha area and elsewhere where women 'natural' rulers existed, in other Igbo areas, women often participated in 'village politics' as a group or in groups.
3. This group is also known as Otu Inyemedi in some areas, particularly among the western Igbo sub-groups (Ibewuiké 2006:70-72), while some other Igbo areas refer to them as Umu-Nyom or Umu-Ndom.
4. These associations existed mostly among indigenes of the southern parts of the country, but more prominently among the Igbo. These hometown associations/unions are considered a success story of 20th Century Igboland and Nigeria. For a fuller discussion on the nature, dynamics, activities and achievements of ethnic Igbo ('hometown') association/union, see Smock (1971) and Osaghae (1994).
5. In Igbo parlance, the word 'abroad' represents any social space outside Igboland, while 'abroadian' stands for anyone who lives in such places. Such persons are often treated with utmost respect and cordiality. 'Home', its twin contrasting term, corresponds to Igboland or more specifically, the various indigenous homelands.

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