

The Concept of “Nne” in the Igbo World View as is Expatiated in Igbo Women August

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Abstract

The term “Nne” often sound as mere term to denote motherhood in Igbo society but it goes beyond the very term. It is a one word sentence that is a name. Some use it as a slogan or as slang. It has traditional undertone in the Igbo socio-cultural life and development. Now that the very term seems to embrace a modern identity of the Igbo, it is being re-emphasized in the features of Igbo Women August Meeting, as a symbol that retains its cultural value as well as embracing the reality of the changes that have enveloped the very term in modern times out of inevitable realities where new responsibilities tend to outweigh its relevance. It is used irrespective of gender although its original etymology stems from female gender. This study recapitulates its responsibilities through its aesthetic manifestation in August Meeting in line with modern realities. The study evaluated its implications for who would be a mother. Literature has been examined and interviews taken to determine the efficacy and efficiency of its responsibilities. This helped give insight to the nature, value and character of these Igbo women, cultural orientation and role in modern society through the association. It has been observed that modern womanhood seems to underrate or undermine its very term. Suggestion have been made on why the revitalization of value is necessary irrespective of modern challenges.

Key words: Nne; Igbo women

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INTRODUCTION

“Nne” is a term used, especially in modern times to signify name, status and many other attributes such as respect, love, togetherness, relationship and other appellation. But “Nne” in the Igbo native custom has a deeper meaning. Some husbands call their wives “Nne.” Some beneficiaries call their female superiors, “NNE.” Some mothers call their female children “Nne” as a beloved female daughter, for one reason or the other. Some refer to the incarnated spirit of the mother or a female relation dear to them irrespective of tribe, race, ethnic group, religion, social standing or gender, “Nne.” It also connotes brotherhood. “Nwanne” means mother’s child. In Igbo language it also means brother.

With the changing trend of things in the modern world old meanings have been adulterated or replaced by entirely new ones. The term “Nne” seems to have lost its meaning among the Igbo speaking societies. Other tribes or ethnic groups also borrow or use it as an appellation. There seem to be a reaffirmation of this term through Igbo women August Meeting. Meanings can be lost on an item. The same item can also mean other things. Meanings can be retrieved or derived based on the character of an identity. To protect it from abuse the study recapitulates on its original values. Thus aspersions on “Igbo women August Meeting” can be justified as criticism. Also the members of the association takes cognizance of the responsibilities that they have lived up to through the events of the association. However, whatever aspersion that is held against Igbo women August Meeting is held against the very term NNE. Yet this responsibility of a word will be an embarrassment to be debased by those for whom it is conceived. Nevertheless, flaws in human character is natural. From these flaws, experience, and new life, perfection can be found.

1. THE CONCEPT OF NNE IN IGBO TRADITION

Unlike in some other cultures outside Africa, especially English or European cultures, the language or term mother may be referring to a female who has given birth to a child or one who nurses a child. This English vernacular differs in many ways in application and identity in the African worlds, especially in Igboland. Depending on its significance, it is often tied or attached to its identifying or defining object or subject. It goes beyond the very term of pronunciation, physically and spiritually because of its responsibilities, implications, status and characteristics. The qualities that have been bestowed on this term cannot be quantified or over emphasized. The first attributed is that of the symbol of fertility or procreation. This natural role is first seen from the spiritual angle in the tradition. Thus, Ezenwanyi, (Ezemma as in male) or Mamwata are similar progenies of the term. Physically, Lolo, (female title holder, equivalent to Ozo title for male), Mamannukwu (Grandmother), Mama, and Nwanne are all attributes that originated from the term Nne. The word mama sounds foreign to the Igbo language. The indigenous word is Nne.

2. WHO IS NNE ?

The process of this insignia on the female begins the moment the female child is born. She is initiated into the role of motherhood early in life which includes, domestic responsibility, communal responsibility, relations, marriage, family and child bearing. She is initiated into the Nne society. Pruning her character which is very important begins at an early stage, to prepare her for maidenhood and for marriage. Examples can be taken from "Ahia Mbibi" from Igbo Ukwu in Anambra State or the "Iria" Festival in Rivers State.

She is directly and indirectly responsible to her society and respected because of that. Therefore any feature of significant value can be attached or tied to the very term as a point of reference, as an evidence of approval, of worth, of relationship, of Kinship, of Kingship, race, ethic group or tribe, and general identity. To create value out of responsibility in a society, genealogy, pedigree, ancestry, origin, brotherhood, terms can be attached to an identity. The term can also be applied thus in Igbo language. Just as the term Chukwu (God) is tied to a majority of Igbo names, Nne (mother) is tied to many words. Listed are some of these Igbo names:

Nne	mother
Nwa nne	brother
Ibe nne or Ikwunne	mother's maiden home
Nnenna	father's mother
Nneoma	beautiful mother
Nneka	mother is great
Ezinne	good mother

Nneamaka	mother is beautiful
Umunne	brothers and sisters
Nne nwanyi	a woman
Nne di uso	mother is sweet

There are other attributes that come in form of proverbs that are based on Nne. For example, the Igbo often say that "Nwanne di na mba" meaning that brotherhood is possible in a foreign land. Brother in Igbo language means "Nwanne". The beauty of this term is a reflection of the character or characteristics for who would be a good mother. Some idioms depict this value:

Onweghi onye si na ofe nne-ya adighi mma

No one will say that her mother's soup is not sweet.

Mkpi sin a njepu amaka ojiri ga ibe nne ya wee muta ke esi a soni onu enu

He goat said that travelling or exposure is educative that was why he went to his mothers kindred and learnt how to raise his lips.

Inee okenye anya nonu odi ka ojigih ya nuo ara nneya

If you look at a man's mouth it will seem as if he did not suck his mother's breast.

Onye aturu ilu kowara ya imara na emeghi ego nisi nneya.

A man who cannot understand proverb is like a man whose mother's father or people did not pay dowry on her head.

Achebe, C. (1958) made reference to an Igbo proverb in his novel "Things Fall Apart", that relates to Nne.

A man belongs to his father land when things are good and life is sweet. But when there is sorrow and bitterness he finds refuge in his motherland your mother is there to protect you. She is buried there. And that is why we say that mother is Supreme. Is it right that you, Okonkwo, should bring to your mother a heavy face and refuse to be comforted. Be careful or you offend the dead. Your duty is to comfort your wives and children and take them back to your fatherland after seven years.

Okonkwo is on exile among his mother's kinsmen. "These are now your kinsmen". "He waved at his sons and daughters."

It is usual in Igbo language to refer to brother, sister or relation as Nwanne instead of Nwa nna. Nwanne also has its relevance, significance or identity. Often Nwanne is referred to a polygamous home or otherwise where a person may be of the same father but not of the same mother. Therefore the term Nne seems to be sacred, respectful and of a customary status. In the days of the Igbo belief in reincarnation, one could say that a new born baby male or female is the reincarnated spirit of the mother.

3. LOCATING THE TRADITIONAL AMBIENCE OF THE NNE IDENTITY

Chinweizu, (1997) gave an insight into the nature of gender role in Igboland:

In Igbo village polities, the umuada (daughters of the lineage) and the umuokpu (A class of titled women) exercise power in various ways. They arbitrate in disputes involving women; they intervene to end disputes or fights between the men of their natal marital lineages; they settle disputes which defy the male authorities; they help to preserve the peace of the marketplace.

Chinweizu further stated that “Women are the ultimate guardians of peace, and the ultimate guarantors of good government, much like the earth goddess, Ala, who is the final moral authority in the land.” Enekwe, O. (1987), also brought to light this reality about the role of Igbo women in the community: “Women are also active in the affairs of every Igbo community. A female organization called Umuada makes this possible. Not only do they arbitrate in cases involving women, they also may intervene to settle quarrels which the authorities have been unable to resolve.” Ilogu, E. (1979), stated that in most Igbo areas the eldest wife of the titled man takes her own title in that of her husband. Such a woman is commonly called Lolo. So the eldest wife of an Ozo title holder is called Lolo. These traditional female features are yet distinct in the characteristics of the Igbo women August Meeting.

4. ABUSE OF THE TERM “NNE”

The term “Nne” can be abused in so many ways. “Ajo Nne” (bad motherhood) is seen everywhere in modern societies where mothers encourage evil or are members of negative associations. Some mothers encourage their children to be irresponsible by spoiling them with wealth, especially, in those wealthy families. On the other hand some poor mother’s encourage and instigate their sons and daughters into undue competition with their relations, neighbours or friends and such children can go into harlotry, armed robbery or other ill vices. Some mothers do not have good character. Many women cheat their families in one way or the other. Some mothers allow their children to do indecent things like indecent dressing. Many cannot control their children. They are too busy with their business. Most mothers are involved in human trafficking, selling of children, abating and conducting heinous crime.

5. RE-EMPHASIS AND REVITALIZATION OF THE NNE STATUS THROUGH IGBO WOMEN AUGUST MEETING

It is true that “August Meeting” is championed by Igbo women Christians (A majority of Igbo women are Christians) but it does not condemn tradition instead it upholds tradition and try to fulfill it where it meets with Christian tradition. The Igbo race has a lot of similarities with Jewish tradition thus when Christianity came it was not difficult for the people to imbibe the new religion

seeing that it promised more and condemned aspects of bestiality and man’s inhumanity to man that was in Igbo tradition. For example, killing of twins, treatment of widows, outcast stigma and others like ohu (slaves or child pawn). The Mary figure is a mother figure, sacrosanct and beloved. Why? She was the mother of the son of God, the identity and point of reference to the nature of the Heavenly Kingdom of God. The oracles have no kingdoms except on the earth, “Ala”. Thus whoever is to be a member of this religious group must answer the name of the group, like “Christians,” which was derived from the son of God, Jesus Christ. Therefore, any would be mother in modern Igbo society who is a Catholic must represent the image of Mary mother of Christ. Also, the Anglican women denomination must represent the image of Mary who is a woman, and also play a representative role in the Anglican Communion “Women’s Guild” and “Mothers Union”; likewise every other Igbo Christian Woman no matter her Christian denomination. Thus in August Meeting, some mothers are awarded the title “Ezinne”.

The Igbo women August meeting is comprised of married Igbo women and women who are married into Igbo society through their husbands. They are first of all umuada (first daughters of every Igbo family married inside or outside the clan or tribe. They come together once a year to discuss how to move the Igbo society forward. It is not a coincidence that this meeting holds in August. The Roman Catholic Assumpta’s celebration, Mary Sumner’s Day, Native meeting, New yam festival all fall in within this period. Therefore, the general meeting of all the women becomes possible and necessary (under CWO¹ and AWO²) for all Igbo women no matter the denomination to avail themselves the opportunity to meet in a general assembly, in a native meeting, CWO or AWO or in the state convention. An example is the meeting that held in Owerri in Imo state in 2017 that had Her Excellency as a guest. The Umuada (or Umuokpu-meaning both alutaradi, inyom di or nwunyedi and umuada), home and abroad meet in a common gathering.

6. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF “NNE” IN AUGUST MEETING

August Meeting which is a call by Igbo women, home and abroad to meet in a particular period in August. It is a modern development in Igbo society which began to be popular in the 1990’s when home movies depicted this Igbo women meeting as a challenge to positive behaviour by women who want to represent the image of responsibility. The women include, CWO, AWO, Native women. The Igbo women have travelled far and wide

¹ Catholic Women Organization

² Anglican Women Organization

with their husbands, especially after the civil war. Their homeland has been battered by war and they do not have to wait to rehabilitate their homes. Therefore, this call began to be prominent. It is a call for especially “Ada’s,” (first born daughters of the land), wherever married or sojourned to come home every year to see how they can develop or help their people. In this meeting, the responsibility of motherhood is re-enacted for members. Modern challenges seem to have overwhelmed these women where men have become house wives due to economic situation and so many reforms or changes due to the demand of time. They are reminded of their responsibilities to their families, husbands, in-laws, relatives and the general society based on the Bible principles and also tradition, (Proverbs 31) identifying a virtuous woman according to the scriptures in Proverbs 31. .

7. “NNE” AS A MARK RESPONSIBILITY

Igbo women August Meeting developed from native meeting. From tradition, her role have not changed in the family, community or the general society. The only challenge is the unavoidable changes of the modern day which seem to have displaced, inevitably gender role psychology, and reality. In Igbo tradition, it was never known, that a woman was the breadwinner of a family let alone her own family, no matter her rank or superior authority in her society. It was a misnomer but now it is part of modern tradition. Igbo women of today are leaders and champions of innovations, solutions and ideals. Thus when they meet they recapitulate on existing problems and encourage each other that there is no problem they cannot solve, God being on their side. In this way, they have settled disputes on families, land; they have promoted their people through various ways like, giving scholarships to deserving children who have no help, built churches, schools, hospitals and civic center and so many other developmental projects. They have contributed in so many ways in modern development of Igbo society.

Okosi, C. (2012) pointed out the features of a virtuous woman, her superiority, dependability, labour, giving to the poor, wisdom in doing things or in judging cases: “who then will regret the days of toil and nights of watching? Who then would exchange the saint’s part and portion, with all its responsibilities as well as privileges, for a place of ease and careless enjoyment of a few fleeting hours on earth? None”.

The president of the August Meeting association advised her members thus:

“This is not the era where women fold their hands and wait for oga to bring the money. Go and learn something: you can learn how to bake cake or snacks or how to make fresh fruit juices. You can learn how to sew clothes or make beads or hats: there are a lot of things to be learnt. Or if your husband has enough money, he can establish a shop or salon for you. But please, by

all means don’t sit at home. The era of sitting at home is gone”.
(August Meeting (3) – Lagos Convo).

She said that the era of housewives has gone forever, that every woman should learn to contribute to the family. She also pointed out that most women borrow money to come to August Meeting. To this she said that there is no sense in borrowing for August meeting. Some may want to impress the others, thus, in CWO or AWO meetings, they wear specified style and material as uniform. The materials are cheap and the style simple.

8. UMUADA

The term Umuokpu refers to Umuada. A group of these women in a community takes a popular position in the Igbo society because they form the association of Igbo women meetings. Today Umuokpu has become a term that includes all married women in an Igbo setting. This group of women developed from the native enclave of the Igbo traditional society. Now they embrace modern civilization because a majority of Igbo families are Christians either as Catholics, Anglican or Pentecostals. Till today, they still converge for the general meeting after the church meeting which they anchor under August meeting. In recent times the term Umuokpu or Umuada are being under estimated, or misunderstood in terms of their position and responsibility in the society. Many may not have known what “August meeting” stands for or who the members are and why it concerns Umuada, CWO or Anglican Women Association (AWO). This study is to disseminate information concerning the relationship of August meeting to the native Igbo women meeting. It has been observed that Umuokpu is August meeting and August meeting is Umuokpu in modern Igbo society. These motherhood terminologies refer to the term “Nne.”

9. THE CONCEPT OF “EZINNE” AWARD IN AUGUST MEETING

The “Ezinne” award in August meeting is the totality of all a woman represents under the CWO umbrella which makes strong reference to the scriptures on the virtuous woman in Proverbs 31. The theme of CWO, Onitsha Archdioceses, 2012 August meeting reads thus:

The woman that fears the God is a foundation and shelter to her home, family and church.

For the Anglican Communion, August Convention, 2012, it reads thus:

Lord Bless me and enlarge my Coast (1st Chronicles 4:10).

The award is given out based on the woman’s good works. It is also an incentive for women to work harder for their homes and the society. Some also are awarded titles like Ambassador. These names and titles are given after careful scrutiny. The woman must have contributed

immensely to the association and the general society in kind or cash to merit the award. They are often leaders who have served the association for many years. An example is Edna Nwosu who have served the association in her home town Abatete in Anambra State for seven (7) years to merit Ezinne.

10. CHANGES, NEW RESPONSIBILITIES INITIATED BY THIS IGBO WOMEN ASSOCIATION

Many changes have been brought into this association that seems to confront both the culture and the critical society. It has inspired aspersions on the women yet it has continued to generate questions, recognition and developments. Nevertheless, a lot of these changes have been mainly on the women folk. These women for a strong force in changing tradition that is no better for them in conformity with Christian tradition. For example, before, a woman whose husband is dead will not come out for a long time, but the church said no through these Igbo women. "Ukpa," is given the woman to go to the market but the church said no. Pentecostal churches (Uka mmaputa) does not cut hair or wear black. Thus, the Catholics made the decision free for the widow. The Catholics abide by the tradition. They had reduced the wearing "akwa uju" to six months. This "akwa uju" could be white instead of the usual black. Also some may decide not to wear the "uju" without prejudice from the church or association.

11. REGISTRY AND QUALIFICATION FOR MEMBERSHIP

You register where you are married, not in your father's home. If you register in your father's home or mother that means you have gone back to your people. If you are not married and you are of age, you can be accepted. Somebody who does not have money for dues is still pardoned because there are other ways in which they can help out like helping the sick or the poor.

Unmarried women do not belong to this association. The association is conceived in its present state out of the decision for women to see each other in August. They make contribution to development and discuss how to keep the family, how children should behave in a family, how to help the poor, especially those without parents. If you are eighty years you are exempted from the dues for community development. If there is something that is not good, decision will be taken on how on how to stop it.

12. MARRIAGE

Mass wedding is usually conducted for those who use funding as an excuse to delay their marriage. They map out the amount of money to be paid to their cabinet before

the wedding of a child of their member. So if you are not wedded in the right way you will not be a member. They can decide what happens to the family.

13. GOVERNMENT CONCERN

If they want to buy land they will need government support not cash. Government help with obtaining of the papers but the women fund it. If there is problem the government will defend them. The association advise the women on how to look after their families. They organize seminars, clinics, workshops on health and agriculture for the public. They often use their own people because there are divers' women dignitaries in the association. No profession is lacking in the association. The general thing is the worship of God, family and the society. They build chapels, halls, schools. They fund these projects through their contributions, dues, donations. They break Kola but represent it with the cake. These meetings have mandate and it must be in August.

They pay school fees for deserving children whose parents cannot afford school fees; they give scholarship, make donations and contributions to motherless babies home or orphans.

They discuss about the society problems like kidnap, armed robbery etc. but they cannot go beyond that to see authorities in order to take action. They don't go beyond the meeting to judge a case. A case can be prolonged until adequate judgment is done. Anybody who goes to police because of a member is fined or suspended.

14. CONCERN FOR MEN

The men support these women who in turn give the men kola. They invite the men who they recognize and who also donate to the women. The men also help in procuring property. The y cook food, organize match past, fashion parade, dance, cultural exhibition, drama (ijije) to make people happy.

Thanksgiving at times translate to auction sales where products donated are sold.

The problem of what to wear has been settled among the women. The white and blue is the ultimate-the China White; white (wash and wear),and diocesan uniform; you must wear archdiocese cloth or you will be fined.

15. POLITICS

Campaign is done during the meeting. But they choose what they want. You are free to vote for anybody. They are still contending that men will start full August meeting.

16. CONDUCT OF ELECTION

Three years term or at the most six years is the mandate. It is through nomination before the vote.

17. LAWS

Behaviours condemned under these women laws come in form of such attitudes listed here:

- A woman who leaves the husband
- Stealing
- Prostitution
- Child molestation
- Any Abominable thing
- Human trafficking (child trafficking or pawning).
- Child Pampering

Husband and wife problem is discussed in the Exco and later brought to General. Judgment is done and the faulted is advised to behave well, that the behaviour is not proper; that it is not good; that they should live well.

If you fight in the market you are fined and suspended, but not excommunicated.

CONCLUSION

The term "Nne" is the totality of what a woman stands for in Igbo culture. The values of her role in the society cannot be overestimated. As Christians or traditionalists, the values of culture has been reconciled and those detrimental to human progress is expunged for that is the whole essence of religion. A popular Igbo woman musician and evangelist whose music "Akanchawa," is admired by many people, said that the lives of men in this world are in the hands of women. Perhaps what she meant is in terms of men and women relationship. Nevertheless, what she said holds true for a lot of reasons and for a lot of families. It is through this channel that families

or generations can control, develop or identify their genealogy. Thus modern Igbo women are admonished to remember their responsibility to the Igbo society and to the world.

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