

August Assembly Meeting in Igbo life



Some Igbo women dancing during a traditional festival

August, the eighth month of the year, has furtively crept into serious reckoning for Igbos as a month in which they must visit home to discuss matters relating to the pursuit of community welfare and national development, writes Sam Nwaoko.

The now famous August gathering has not come to be known by any local name in Igboland and so, it has generally been referred to as "August Meeting". This taxonomy, strange as it seems to core Igbo practices, knows no bounds among the generality of the people. From the precincts of Igbo-speaking states of Nigeria to their bounds in Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi and Enugu states, August Meeting has the same meaning and appeal.

It is now commonplace to see large groups of predominantly female Igbos 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 temporarily throughout the duration of the women's absence for the meeting.

"This must be so because a lot of towns and communities in Igboland now place a very heavy fine on absenteeism", said Mrs. Vicky Onwuchekwa, President of the Women's Wing of Awomukwu Progressive Union, Ibadan branch, in an interview. The women also endeavour to travel at that time because they view with serious concern the unquantifiable cost in emotional injury which the gossip about their absence would lead to.

However, young families hardly engage in the yearly ritual and the preponderance of young Igbo men and women who married outside Igboland dominate this group.

"The build up to the yearly August journey starts soon afterwards because some families cannot afford the cost of embarking on a sudden journey", Mrs. Onwuchekwa stated. Also, some do not necessarily have to travel when there are cogent reasons (e.g. new child delivery or an ailment) she also explained.

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 the large number of their daughters and daughters-in-law abroad. And the meetings often 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.

However, just as the annual August meetings do not come easy for thousands of impecunious Igbo women who abound in and outside Igboland, the ritual is also not devoid of other forms of heartache for those whose economic status cannot sustain it. Stories have been told of many families that experienced problems over their inability to send a delegation to the meeting, while others descend into mourning following motor and other form of accidents that involve their loved ones on their way to or from the meeting.

There are also stories of women who have suffered spiritually, even to the extent of death, from various kinds of attacks at their annual community meetings. "That," according to the leader of Igbo Sunshine Women's Club of Lagos, Mrs. Cordelia Eluwa, "unfortunately happens. But I think it occurs more out of jealousy and other primordial vices than from the need not to converge for the welfare of the community", she contended.

According to Eluwa, whose group sponsors three members to the meeting annually from Lagos, many measures have been put in place to ensure that there is unity among Igbo women wherever they are in the country.

"Our club is made up of women from all the states of Igboland and the motto is to promote Igbo women's unity. One of the ways we are doing this is to help those who need help to attend the meetings both as way of staying near home and also a means of contributing to the growth of their various communities", she said.

The other way is by promoting uniformity. "Agreed we are not all equal, but we strive very hard to de-emphasise that in our dealings. We have women who are university graduates and who are professionals in various fields of human endeavour while we also have those who are petty traders. We also have some women who are housewives, whose husbands only want to participate in activities concerning their towns", Mrs. Enuwa added.

She made it known that it is now the norm for all women attending the meetings to dress in uniform, their status notwithstanding. "We wear white blouses made from "China" fabric on our uniform Ankara wrapper on the days of the meeting", Enuwa pointed out.

Some of the men who would talk about their wives' participation in the annual women merry meeting hold the view that non-participation could mean a lot of things to different kinds of people in their areas. "I am the chairman of my town's meeting and you know it will not speak well if my wife fails to represent our people in Ibadan at the meeting", Chief L. U. Okafor said.

"It is not out of place for one to take it up as a challenge to attend the meeting every other year. Apart from the advantage of keeping abreast with happenings at home, one will also be seeing one's people and generally get along", he added.

Sir Paul Arinze, said his wife does not take August meeting seriously and therefore, said "I do not even think about it." He stated further that his wife places more emphasis on religious activities and hardly ever talks about going home for August meeting.

For varying reasons, many participate in it, while others do not. However, the gathering is popular among the people and it appears set to continue for a long time and probably assume new dimensions in the future.