

## THE IGBO OF SOUTHEAST NIGERIA

Ву

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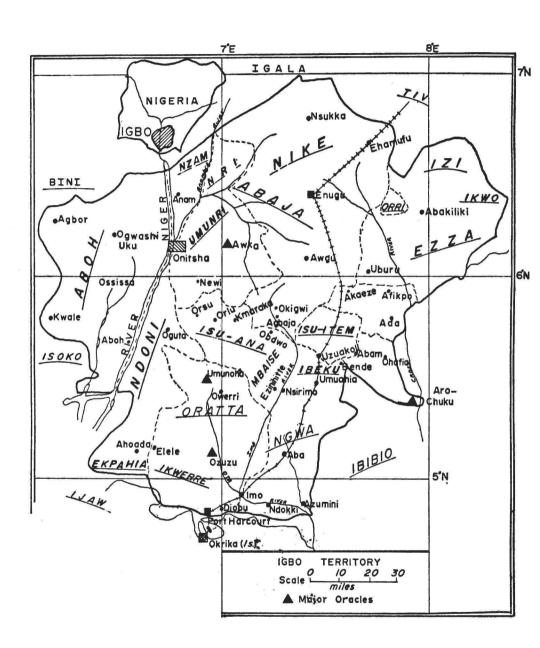
# CASE STUDIES IN CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

GENERAL EDITORS

George and Louise Spindler
STANFORD UNIVERSITY

The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria

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#### Foreword

#### About the Series

These case studies in cultural anthropology are designed to bring to students in the social sciences insights into the richness and complexity of human life as it is lived in different ways and in different places. They are written by men and women who have lived in the societies they write about, and who are professionally trained as observers and interpreters of human behavior. The authors are also teachers, and in writing their books they have kept the students who will read them foremost in their minds. It is our belief that when an understanding of ways of life very different from one's own is gained, abstractions and generalizations about social structure, cultural values, subsistence techniques, and the other universal categories of human social behavior become meaningful.

#### About the Author

Victor Chikezie Uchendu is a candidate for the doctorate in anthropology at Northwestern University. A graduate of the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, he received his Bachelor of Science (Honors) degree from London University. At Ibadan, Mr. Uchendu distinguished himself by winning the Departmental Prize (1959–1960) and the Faculty Prize (1960–1961) of the Department of Economics and Social Studies. He has carried out research among the southeastern Igbo, his home area. He has also completed a field study of the migratory labor patterns of the Navaho Indians (1964–1965). His articles on aspects of Igbo culture have been published in academic journals.

#### About the Book

This case study is one of those rare events in anthropological literature—an ethnography written by one of the people whose culture is being described. Written by an Igbo about his own people, this case study penetrates to the heart of the Igbo culture and social system. Mr. Uchendu shows us how the people in this Nigerian society think about the world around them, and how they conceive of their own social system and its workings. Descriptions of the thinking and feeling of a people from the inside are not frequent in anthropological literature, for it is difficult for the observer from the outside world to penetrate beyond manifest behavior to the inner patterns of a way of life. The author has also given us an intellectually satisfying analysis of the objective workings of the Igbo system. We come to an understanding of how the Igbo make a living, how

#### viii · FOREWORD

they govern themselves, how the family is founded, how the network of kinship functions, as well as many other dimensions of Igbo life. And finally he shows us how the Igbo have responded to contact with European culture.

GEORGE AND LOUISE SPINDLER General Editors

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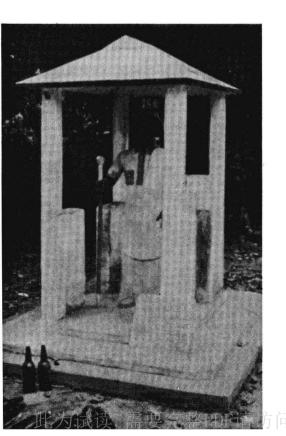
Diegwu, a solo dancer, entertains at a "second burial" ceremony in an Igbo village.

Processing palm oil by the traditional method, showing the first stage in the "soft" oil production.





Igbo women celebrate a gala day.



Oba, an Igbo yam house.

Left: A cement tomb sculpture: a new symbol of status for a deceased Igbo chief.

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## Contents

Foreword	vii
Introduction	1
1. The Igbo World  The World of Man and the World of Spirits, 11  Maintaining Cosmological Balance, 12  Manipulating His World, 15  Cyclical Nature of Status Seeking, 16  Transparent Living, 17  "A Country Is Spoiled by Men," 18  A World of Change, 19  Equalitarianism, 19  Summary, 20	11
2. How the Igbo Make Their Living  Farming: Land Tenure, 22  The Farming Cycle, 24  The Preparation of Palm Oil, 26  Trading, 27  The Marketplace and the "Market Peace," 28  The "Market Ring," 28  Price Determination, 29  Livestock Tenancy, 30  Wage Labor, 31	22
3. Helping the Town "To Get Up"  Earlier Patterns of "Getting Up,"34  Modern Development and Self-Help, 36 "Human Investment," 36  The Improvement Unions, 37	34
4. Igbo Ways in Government  Authority in the "Family," 39  Autonomy of the Village, 41  Government of the Village-Group (Town), 44  Three Sample Governments, 44	39

#### xii · CONTENTS

Igboland under Colonial Rule, 46
The Direct Administration, 46
The Warrant Chiefs, 46
The Reforms of 1930–1931, 48
Changes Preceding Independence, 48

5. Founding a New Family
Emphasis on Married Status, 49
Types of Marriage, 50

49

76

Emphasis on Married Status, 49
Types of Marriage, 50
Stages in the Marriage Process, 51
The Adjustment of the New Bride, 53
The "Big Compound" Ideal of the Igbo Family, 54
The Developmental Cycle of the "Big Compound," 55
New Trends in the Igbo Family System, 56

6. Growing Up in an Igbo Village

Igbo Ideas about Conception, 57

A Child Is Born, 58

The Umbilical Cord, 58

A Child Is Named, 60

"Churching"—An Outing Ceremony, 60

The Igbo Child Shares Two Worlds, 61

7. The Kinship Network

The Agnates, 64

The Mother's Agnates, 66

The "Remote" Kinsmen, 67

Balancing Kinship Conflicts, 67

Naming the Kin, 68

8. Igbo Hospitality 71

Principles of Hospitality, 71

Forms of Hospitality, 72

"Kola" Hospitality, 74

9. Nonkinship Associations

Work Groups, 76

Credit Associations, 77

Dibia Associations, 81

Title Societies, 82

Associations and Village Integration, 82

10. Status Placement among Igbo	84
Age and Kinship Status, 84	
Marriage and Social Position, 86 The Status of Women, 86	
Diala and Non-Diala Status, 87	
The Osu System of Slavery, 89	
Leadership and Status Placement, 90 Associational Status, 91	
Western Impact on the Igho Status System, 92	
w estern 1mpact on the 1800 Status System, 72	
11. Igbo Gods and Oracles	94
Igbo Ideas of the High God, 94	
Ala, the Earth-Goddess, 95	
Other Spirits, 96	
Igbo Oracles, 100	
The Ancestors, 102	
12. The Igbo and Culture Contact	103
12. The 1gbo and Culture Contact	103
Orthography	107
References	109
	109
Recommended Reading	111

dry season commences. Rainfall is heavier in the south than in the north, many areas having more than 70 inches a year. During the rainy season a "break" occurs in August. Southeasterners call it  $\imath k \imath chi ji$  oko¹—the drought favorable to the growth of ji oko (yam). Important in the seasonal cycle are the southwest monsoon winds that bring rain and the northeast winds that are dry and dusty as well as cold. These winds, as well as the dry, dusty chilly conditions they cause, are locally known as  $\Theta gere$ —harmattan. They are the farmer's friend. They open the bush, dry the clearings, kill some of the insects which destroy crops and make the burning of rubbish easy.

In many parts of northern and central Igbo country today, the big forests have become secondary bush or eroded gullies. The former is caused by the pattern of farming known as "bush fallowing," while the latter results from rain water sweeping down from steep slopes across cultivated farm lands which had little surface vegetation to check it. Oil palm (Elaeis guineensis) and raphia palm (Raphia vinifera), our most important economic assets, either are growing wild or are cultivated in plantations. Hardwood trees such as obeche, vji (iroko),  $\Theta k\Theta$ , and E dO provide timber. Indiscriminate slaughter of animals in a country where tsetse flies limit the type and number that can survive, a slaughter hastened by the early introduction of flintlock guns, accounts for the scarcity of game. However, ivory horns and ivory ornaments which are features of ceremonials tell a history of a glorious past rich in elephants.

According to Nigeria's census of 1953, the Igbo-speaking people numbered five and a half million. This population is very unevenly distributed, the bulk of it concentrated in a geographical axis formed by Onitsha, Orlu, Okigwi, and Mbaise areas. Along the Onitsha-Mbaise axis the density of population exceeds 1000 per square mile in many places thus giving us one of the world's most densely populated rural areas subsisting on root crops raised through hoe culture. In all directions from this "population" axis, the density of population falls below the Igbo average of 350 per square mile but remains well above Nigeria's average of 85 per square mile.

When and from where the Igbo came into their present territory is not known. Their origin is a subject of much speculation. The people have no common tradition of origin. It is only rather recently that some Igbo-speaking communities have ceased to claim that they are not Igbo. What local traditions the Igbo have do not provide clues to their origin. It is for this reason that some Western writers on the colonial era treated the Igbo as "a people without history." We have since come to know better. A people with a culture are a people with some form of history. The Igbo have a culture; they have also a history—an unwritten history which it is the task of the culture historian to piece together. The Igbo culture historian is presently handicapped because there is little ar-

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup>A guide to the sounds represented by the phonetic symbols will be found on page

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Bush fallowing erroneously termed "shifting cultivation" is a method of farming in which a farmer leaves a piece of land after cultivation for a period of years (ranging from two to eight, depending on the pressure on land) and returns to it after it has regained its fertility through natural regeneration of vegetation.

cheological data from which he can draw. His only sources of data are cultural: fragmentary oral traditions and the correlation of cultural traits.

An analysis of demographic patterns, trait lists, and other cultural features, combined with available local traditions, leads us to two interrelated hypotheses of Igbo origin: that there exists a core area which may be called the "nuclear" Igboland; and that waves of immigrant communities from the north and the west planted themselves on the border of the nuclear Igboland as early as the fourteenth or the fifteenth century.

The belt formed by Owerri, Awka, Orlu, and Okigwi divisions constitutes this "nuclear" area: its people have no tradition of coming from any other place. It is a most densely populated area. We assume an early migration from this area into the Nsukka-Udi highlands in the north and into Ikwerri, Etche, Asa, and Ndokki in the south. The eastern Isuama claim to have come from this center. News traditions point to their secondary migration from Mbaise. The general character of the secondary and tertiary dispersion of population in the recent past tended to be short and in all directions: north, south, east, and west. This was a movement that tended to homogenize Igbo culture. The main attractions for dispersion included an ever-widening frontier of the "no man's land" and the desire to found independent villages, but the most compelling reasons were the pressure of population in certain areas and natural disasters that made continued settlement in some places inauspicious.

In addition to this pattern of migration from the nuclear area, there are traditions, confirmed by intrusive culture traits, of peoples who entered Igbo territory in about the fourteenth or the fifteenth century. Of these, there are the Nri, in whom Igala influence is marked; and the Nzam and Anam, who combine Bini and Igala traits. Onitsha, Oguta, and the Ezechima group of villages in western Igbo claim affinity with Bini and have their kingship institution to show "as evidence of descent." Their eponymous ancestor Chima-an Igbo nameconclusively demonstrates that these Ezechima people were not Bini but Igbospeaking people once under the political domination of Benin Kingdom. The distinguishing characteristics of these "late-comers" include their geographical marginality, kingship institution, hierarchical title system, and amosu tradition (witchcraft).

If the origin of the Igbo is uncertain, the word "Igbo" is not without its own puzzles. Until comparatively recent times, some Igbo-speaking peoples like the Onitsha, Nri, and Oguta claimed that they were not Igbo, and used the word as a term of abuse for their "less cultured" neighbors. Today, "Igbo" is used in three senses: to refer to Igbo territory, to the domestic speakers of the language, and to the language spoken by them. According to Greenberg's (1949:87) classification of African languages, the Igbo language is one of the speech communities in the Kwa subfamily of the Niger-Congo family. It is marked by a complicated system of tones used to distinguish meaning and grammatical relationships, a wide range of dialectical variations that is a source of difficulty to Westerners but not to the Igbo, and a tendency to vowel elision which makes it difficult to express a few of the spoken words in writing. If we follow a longitudinal dialectic profile, we encounter mutual intelligibility between the communities at the center and those at the poles; but between the polar communities intelligibility varies from partial to almost nil. These polar dialects are the result of greater marginal isolation rather than survivors of a previous dialect cradleland.

European contact with the Igbo-speaking peoples dates back to the arrival of the Portuguese in the middle of the fifteenth century. For nearly four centuries (1434–1807), the Niger Coast formed a "contact community"—the contact point between European and African traders: the Portuguese from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the Dutch from the seventeenth, and the British from the eighteenth century. It was a period of trade on the coast rather than one of conquest or empire building in the hinterland. The chief item provided by the Igbo was slaves, many of whom came to the New World. The monopoly held by the coastal slavers (traders from the Niger states) reduced Igbo slavers to the role of middlemen who rarely dealt directly with European slavers. The local trade currencies of this period included manillas, copper rods, iron bars, whisky, and, later, cowrie shells.

With the abolition of the slave trade in 1807, a new trading epoch opened. There was a shift from the traffic in men to the traffic in the raw materials of industry: palm products, timber, elephant tusks, and spices became the merchandise of the "legitimate" trader. With this shift, the European traders could no longer be confined to the coast. They saw their real interest, the "trader's frontier," in the hinterland, which was still the source of both illegitimate and legitimate goods. In the struggle to establish a "free trade" hinterland between 1807–1885, the British companies played a decisive role for Britain through their joint program, which combined aggressive trading with aggressive imperialism.

When in 1900, the Protectorate of Southern Nigeria was created from the former British Niger Company's administrative area and the Niger Coast Protectorate, and control of this area passed from the British Foreign Office to the Colonial Office, Igboland had been technically treated as a British colony even before it was formally conquered and pacified. Between 1902, when the Aro "Long Juju" was destroyed, and 1914, when Northern and Southern Nigeria were amalgamated, there were twenty-one British military expeditions into Igboland. It was not until 1928, when Igbo men were made to pay tax for the first time in their history, that it became clear to them that they were a subject people.

No sketch of the British penetration of Igboland is complete without a word about the missionaries. It was in 1857 that Bishop Crowther successfully established a Church Missionary Society mission at Onitsha. The Roman Catholic Mission followed in 1885. Onitsha thus became the religious and educational center of these two great proselytizing missions as well as the base for British military penetration into northern Igboland. Although the missionaries enjoyed the protective power and the military prestige of the advancing colonial power, it was the "mystery of the written word"—the psychology of the "bush schools" founded by them—rather than military might or the "content of the Bible" which assured their success among the Igbo.

In the following chapters, the reader will be introduced to Igbo society and culture by one of its culture-bearers who has been privileged to gather his data as a "full participant" and tries to write as "a man of science." These two state-