



AMERICAN UNIVERSITY STUDIES



# Traditions of Igbo Origin

A Study of Pre-Colonial Population  
Movements in Africa

Revised Edition

*John Nwachimereze Orij*



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**This book is dedicated to my late father, Chief Isaac Erugo Orij**

## Preface to the Second Edition

This book has attempted to analyze and synthesize the traditions of Igbo origins. Like other works of its nature, it has given varying degrees of insight into the traditions of Igbo communities depending upon the primary and secondary sources available for studying them. While many communities for example, have rich oral and recorded traditions, the pieces of information we have on some others are sketchy, and at times, the major issues they raised are not relevant to this work. Although the book has as much as possible, discussed the traditions of most communities, it is not exhaustive. There are communities that are left out because their traditions have not yet been studied.

The first edition of this book, which was almost sold out a year after its publication, succeeded in arousing some fruitful debate on pre-colonial population movements in Igboland and other parts of Africa. It is hoped that researchers would find the revised edition equally challenging and provocative. I have, as much as possible, taken the various reviews in scholarly journals into consideration in revising the book. But my basic assumptions, especially on pre-seventeenth century population movements, remain largely unchanged. My views on these population movements are based on plausible inferences derived from archeology, oral traditions and other sources. I have tried at times to be hedgy in discussing myths and complex chronological and other problems associated with pre-history. I think it is better to maintain a healthy academic skepticism in dealing with these problems than to rush into unfounded conclusions about them.

Chapter 1 of the current edition has been revised in detail to give an overview of Igbo history before colonialism. The present author also examined in that chapter the chronological problems he encountered while studying oral traditions, and the techniques he adopted in his research. Similarly, Chapters 2 and 10 were respectively modified to raise issues on pre-colonial population movements in Africa and

incorporate the traditions of some Northeastern Igbo communities. Chapter 13 dealing with my conclusions, has been added to summarize and highlight some of the major issues raised in the book. The bibliography was also revised to include the new sources used for this study.

I wish to thank once more several individuals who assisted me in my research, particularly, J.E.N. Nwaguru, former zonal coordinator, Nigerian National Archives, Enugu, and the workers in the search room of the archives. I also owe a lot of gratitude to my students and colleagues at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, and, especially, to my informants who have helped in advancing my knowledge of Igbo origins. Their contributions have been acknowledged in the appropriate sections of this book.

I am, in addition, indebted to the late Professor D.I. Nwoga who encouraged me and made a research grant available for my field work in parts of Igboland in 1984 when he was the Director of the Institute of African Studies, University of Nigeria. Dr. C. Aniakor, who succeeded Professor Nwoga, also showed keen interest in this work and provided some assistance that helped in its completion. I am also grateful to Messrs. O. Dibia of the Department of Geography (Cartographic Unit), University of Nigeria, and Andrew Bicknell of Fort Lewis College, Durango, Colorado, who drew the maps and sketches. This revised edition was typed by Mary Kersey of Pismo Beach, California and Cindy Esola of the Financial Aid Office, California Polytechnic State University.

Finally, I wish to sincerely thank my wife, Rita Odochi Oriji. Without her encouragement and invaluable support, it would have been difficult for me to find the time to complete this work.



## Contents

List of Maps and Figures	ix
Preface and Acknowledgements	xi
1 An Overview of the Igbo Cultural Area	1
2 Igbo Origin, Settlements and Migrations	21
3 Awka and Parts of Northern Igboland	37
4 Awgu-Udi-Nsukka Escarpment	61
5 Western Igboland	77
6 Isuama Heartland of Orlu	95
7 Migration of the Isu and Other Groups to Okigwe Axis	111
8 Oratta-Owerri and Isuama Expansion	121
9 The Isuama of Mbaise-Obowo Axis: The Ohuhu-Ngwa Migrations	133
10 Umuahia and Eastern Igboland: Migrations of the Ohuhu and Other Groups	145
11 The Ngwa, Asa and Ndoki of Aba Zone	161

## Contents

12	Traditions of Origins of Ikwerre, Igbere and Omuma-Etche Groups	179
13	Conclusion	191
	Bibliography	201
	Index	219

## Maps

1. Igboland Showing the Sub-cultural Areas, Towns and Communities ..... 4

## Figures

1. Genealogical Chart of Edem ..... 72
2. Movement of Chima and others from Ado-na-Idu to Illah ..... 84
3. Expansion of the Isuama to other parts of Igbo Heartland ..... 99
4. Genealogical Chart of the Oratta Clan ..... 125
5. Villages of Owerri Claiming Descent from Ekwem Arugo ..... 127
6. Genealogical Chart of Egbu ..... 128
7. Genealogical Chart of Ohafia ..... 150
8. Dispersion of the Ngwa, Asa and Ndoki from their Nuclear Areas ..... 166
9. Dispersion from Eke-Igbere ..... 184

## **Chapter 1**

### **An Overview of the Igbo Cultural Area**

Igboland is located between latitude 5 degrees to 7 degrees North and longitude 6 degrees to 8 degrees East (Map 1). It occupies a total land mass of about 15,800 square miles.<sup>1</sup> The Igbo cultural area is characterized by a variety of physical features and vegetation forms. The riverine and delta regions bordering the Atlantic Ocean in the south, are watered by the Niger and Imo rivers. Neighboring non-Igbo groups in the south include the Ijaw, Efik, and Ibibio. The rain forest zone lies in the center. It extends from Western Igboland bordering Edo-speaking Bini and other groups to the tablelands east of the Niger stretching from the Rivers to Aba, Owerri and parts of Orlu axis and from there to the Cross River region. The forest zone is drained by the Niger, Imo, and their tributaries as well as the Ulasi and Cross River. The last zone, located in the hilly areas in the north, was densely forested in the past. But over time, the northern zone has in some places been reduced to derived savanna due to human activity. The zone stretches from Abakiliki to Awgu and Udi-Nsukka escarpment, and from there to Okigwe and Awka axis.

The Igbo are amongst the three major ethnic groups of Nigeria.<sup>2</sup> Their total population is unknown. But projections based on the census figures of the 1950s and 1960s, indicate that the Igbo constitute 25 percent or about 20 million people out of Nigeria's current total population estimated between 80 million to 100 million.<sup>3</sup> According to D. Forde and G. I. Jones, the Igbo are subdivided into five major subcultural groups comprising Northern or Onitsha Igbo viz the Nri-Awka, Enugu and Onitsha town; the Southern or Owerri Igbo consisting of the Isuama, Oratta-Ikwerre, Ohuhu-Ngwa and Isu-Item; the Western Igbo who are subdivided into the Northern Ika, Southern Ika (Kwale) and Riverain; the Eastern or Cross River Igbo composed of Ada (Edda), Abam-Ohafia and Aro; and the Northeastern Igbo (Ogu Uku) consisting of Abakaliki and Afikpo groups (Map 1).<sup>4</sup>

The etymology and meaning of their name, "Igbo," vary amongst researchers. M. D. Jeffreys, in his brief analysis, maintained that "Igbo" was a name originally applied to "forest-dwellers."<sup>5</sup> His definition needs

to be examined closely since the Yoruba claim in their legendary tradition of origin that their putative ancestor, Oduduwa, encountered the indigenous inhabitants of the forest region called "Igbo" when he and his followers settled at Ile-Ife.<sup>6</sup> Other sketchy definitions have been made by M. Onwuejeogwu and C. K. Meek who respectively argued that "Igbo" meant "a community of people" and "the people."<sup>7</sup> In his own contribution, however, C. Ifemesia postulated that "Igbo" simply meant "the ancients," a name he claimed was derived from two Igbo words, "Ndi-gbo", "Ndi" (people) and "gbo" (ancients).<sup>8</sup>

The name "Igbo," however, took on a different meaning during the slave trade when some neighboring coastal and Igala communities pejoratively associated it with slavery because of the large numbers of Igbo slaves they either acquired or exported overseas.<sup>9</sup> This definition is related to that of Forde and Jones who have given the impression that "Igbo" was a name Europeans invented and applied to any Igbo groups during slavery. Before then, they argued, village-groups bore the names of their putative ancestral founders instead of identifying themselves with the common name "Igbo."<sup>10</sup>

It is noteworthy that a similar hypothesis propounded in 1848 by S. W. Koelle who claimed that the Igbo did not identify themselves with their common name, was dismissed by W. Baikie.<sup>11</sup> After leading the Niger expedition which took him to parts of Igboland, Baikie in 1855 asserted that "the name Ibo or Igbo is familiarly employed amongst the natives as London is among us."<sup>12</sup> Similarly, O. Equiano in his memoirs, published in 1789 constantly referred to his people as "Eboe."<sup>13</sup> There is no concrete evidence to show that he learned their name from Europeans.

Furthermore, traditions obtained from the core areas of Igbo settlement and migration in Nri-Awka and Orlu-Owerri axis (Central Igboland) reinforce the view that many village-groups were aware of the fact that they belonged to the Igbo ethnic group before the advent of Europeans. Evidence of the ancient usage of their common name is provided by communities like Igbo-Ukwu in Nri-Awka and Ama-Igbo



(Amaigbo) in Orlu area which have the word "Igbo" respectively prefixed and suffixed to them.

Amaigbo (the abode of Igbo), for example, is regarded as the ancestral homeland of many Isuama communities of Central and Southern Igboland. According to tradition, the town was founded by a man called "Igbo" who domesticated yams (ji) and cocoyams (ede) which formed the major staples of the Igbo until the introduction of cassava (manioc) in modern times. The cultivation of these crops was so institutionalized amongst the Igbo that their name was closely associated with it. Thus, whenever an Igbo man's life was threatened outside his cultural environment, he simply shouted, "Igbo neri ji na ede, unu nokwa ebea?" (Igbo who eat yams and cocoyams-meaning who domesticated these crops-are you around?). On hearing this frantic call for help, the Igbo rushed with available weapons to rescue their "kinsman" from danger.<sup>14</sup>

Informants state that much reverence was shown to Amaigbo in the past by many groups. The Isuama Igbo, for example, used to undertake periodic pilgrimages to the town to participate in a variety of activities ranging from the celebration of new year festivals to the worship of their common ancestral gods.<sup>15</sup> It is significant that during the meetings of the defunct Ibo State Union, elders from Amaigbo-Orlu axis were given the privilege of blessing kolanuts presented to the association before they were shared out to the various delegates.<sup>16</sup> In addition, C. J. Pleass' intelligence report suggests that offshoot Central Igbo settlements which traced their ancestry to "Igbo" were in their locality given privileges similar to that of Amaigbo. A typical example is Ibeku, a town which was highly respected by the Ohafia, Uzuakoli and other neighbors in Umuahia area because its founder was said to be one of the sons of "Igbo."<sup>17</sup>

The foregoing examples indicate that many communities in the Igbo cultural area, have legendary traditions of common Igbo origin. The cultural integration of Igbo communities was further reinforced by the fact that they occupy a contiguous territory and speak a common



language. Surely, Igbo village-groups numbering over 200 during colonialism, were largely autonomous political entities. But as K. O. Dike aptly pointed out:

Beneath the apparent fragmentation of authority [in Igbo society] lay deep fundamental unities not only in the religious spheres, but also ... in matters of politics and economics.<sup>18</sup>

The political community of some groups like the Ngwa, Oratta, and other "clans" was not localized. It cut across a large section of Igboland, transcending the village-group level.<sup>19</sup>

## **Economic Life and Political Organization**

Traditional Igbo society was characterized by a division of labor amongst the sexes. Men, for example, were responsible for hunting wild animals, rearing animals like cows and goats, and tapping raffia (palm wine) trees. They also harvested palm trees and cultivated various species of yams (ji) regarded as the "king of all crops," such as the "white yam" or "Eboe [Igbo] yam" (*D. Rotundata*) which was probably domesticated in Igboland.

The cult of the yam deity (Njoku, Ajokuji) is highly institutionalized amongst the Igbo who, according to D. Coursey, constitute the "most enthusiastic yam cultivators" not only in West Africa, but probably all over the world.<sup>20</sup> Yam cultivation promoted the ethics of hard work and competition in Igbo society. Every family was involved in yam cultivation and men spared no effort in cultivating as many yams as possible to increase their wealth and power. Those of them who succeeded in stacking about 400 yams in their barns during the harvesting season, were qualified to acquire the prestigious Ezeji or Duruji title which enhanced their social status.

Women, on their part, were also actively involved in farming. They cultivated mainly indigenous species of cocoyams (ede), cassava and a