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Ngwa History

A Study of Social and Economic Changes
in Igbo Mini-States in Time Perspective

John Nwachimereze Orij



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This book is dedicated to my late father, Chief Isaac Erugo Oriji and the pioneers of Ngwaland, “Onyeukwu la Nwaoha.”

Preface

This book is meant to help in preserving the history and culture of the Ngwa and other Igbo people. Although all Nigerian societies are changing, the pace of social change since colonialism, has been probably more remarkable amongst the Igbo than other major ethnic groups. Admittedly, change is inevitable in history, and modernization brings numerous benefits. But they have contributed to the loss of ancient wisdom of the elders and complex oral traditions embodying various aspects of Igbo culture and history. As the elders and custodians of the traditions pass away, young people who are expected to perpetuate knowledge of the past are preoccupied with the quest for wealth, power and status, and some think “history is dead” because it has no relevance to their material needs. It is then necessary to preserve the Ngwa past in a work of this nature for posterity since its author believes that those who ignore the invaluable lessons of history, are likely going to find it difficult to understand the present, and plan for fruitful future.

The need for this research is also reinforced by the fact that Igbo history and culture were ignored by pioneer African historians who primarily studied the ruling elite of the mega states, or the colonial period for which documents exist. Due to their orientation, the historians assumed that the Igbo and other so-called stateless peoples lacked rich traditions that would be helpful in studying their history. It took much time for some historians to accept that the mega states and Igbo mini states are a product of the human experience and none is superior to the other. Thanks to advances in historical methodology, each of them is being studied at the present time to enrich our knowledge of the African past.

The study of Igbo history and culture began between the 1950s-60s when efforts to decolonize African history had gained increasing momentum. A few historians and anthropologists such as K. O. Dike, J. C. Anene and G. I. Jones gave sketchy but valuable information on the Igbo past. Other scholars including Ottenberg, R. Henderson and I. Nzimiro later embarked on a micro study of some Igbo societies. The efforts made by the earlier researchers had yielded fruitful results by the 1970s

when historians like E. Isichei, S. N. Nwabara and C. Ifemesia began to use available sources to write books on Igbo history. Since the 1980s, Igbo historiography has been enriched by a variety of works ranging from A. E. Afigbo and F. K. Ekechi's micro study of Igbo societies to the present author's recent research on Igbo origins.

In addition to the various sources discussed, the present author has benefitted from the existing works on Ngwa history and culture. Among them are the pioneering study of J. Jackson in 1930 and particularly that of J. G. C. Allen, an Assistant District Officer who in 1933, compiled three volumes of his oral research titled, "Intelligence Reports on the Ngwa Clan." Also noteworthy are the dissertations or project essays of final year undergraduate students of the Department of the History, University of Nigeria, Nsukka. Some of them give an insight into the local history of Ngwa communities. Associated with these primary sources are the unpublished theses of T. C. Mbagwu, J. U. Nwachukwu and others.

Two major books have been written on the Ngwa recently. The first book by J. E. N. Nwaguru discusses their political history during colonialism while the other one by S. M. Martin, focuses mainly on the palm oil industry and the Aba Women's Revolt, although it provides insightful information on the economic history of the Ngwa between the 19th and 20th centuries.

This work is, however, different in some ways from the others published on Ngwa history. It discusses methodological problems arising from using either the synchronic or diachronic approach in studying the Ngwa past (see Chapter 1). In addition, unlike the existing publications which deal mainly with the colonial era, the present research has analyzed thematically, the history of the Ngwa from the pre-colonial period to modern times. Some of the themes are discussed in such a way as to raise issues not only on Igbo history but also on African history.

Chapter 2 discusses the genesis of Ngwa society in the context of Igbo origins and the inferences that can be made from the Bantu migrations. Chapter 3 examines political authority in Ngwa society and uses the Ngwa example to show that the Igbo evolved mini and mega states in the past. Chapter 4 further uses the Ngwa example to analyze the various ways trade was organized in the Igbo hinterland from the pre-

Portuguese period to the 19th century. Also discussed are the roles the Okonko title society, Abam warriors, the Aro and other oracular specialists played in the overseas trade. The concluding part of that Chapter evaluates the effects of the slave in the Igbo area and other parts of Africa, as well as the Americas. Chapter 5 analyzes the social and economic changes which occurred among the Ngwa and other peoples of the hinterland as they shifted from the slave trade to legitimate commerce, while Chapter 6 sheds some light on the colonial period and the roots of the Aba Women's Revolt. Chapter 7 presents an overview of the crises that culminated in the birth of Biafra, and the genesis the Nigerian civil war. It also for the first time, examines the events that led to the declaration of a state of emergency in Aba Province during the civil war. Chapter 8 concludes the research on Ngwa history, highlighting major issues, and offering some solutions to Africa's developmental problems.

The revision of this book was made possible by a State Faculty Research Grant (SFRG) awarded to its author in 1994. I wish to thank members of the committee of the SFRG at Cal Poly for the award. I also wish to acknowledge the contributions of my field assistant, Cecilia Hastings who worked assiduously to collect oral data for this study in Stockton, California. Similarly, I am indebted to sacred authority holders, traditional rulers, chiefs and other informants in Ngwa, Ukwu, Mbaise and other areas who enthusiastically shared with me the oral histories of their communities. Their contributions have been acknowledged in my endnotes.

My colleagues in History Department, Professors P. Hiltbold, L.M. Hudson and J. Moser read chapters of this book, and offered valuable comments that helped in sharpening some of my assumptions. I am thankful to all of them. The first edition of **Ngwa history** grew out of my Doctoral Thesis at Rutgers University, New Jersey. I wish to acknowledge the assistance given to me by my academic advisor, Professor S.J.S.Cookey formerly of the Department of History and Africana Studies, A. Howard of the Department of History and Y. Cohen of the Department of Anthropology, Rutgers University. Dr. G.I.C. Eluwa formerly of the Department of History, Cross River State University, Nigeria, also gave some suggestions that broadened my perspectives.

Finally, I cannot fully express my gratitude to my wife, Rita Odochi Oriji for her encouragement and inspiration which sustained me in carrying out my research. She also took care of our family while I was engaged either in library, archival and field work or in the analysis of my data. Without her assistance and support, the revision of **Ngwa history** would have been a herculean task. In keeping with custom, I will like to absolve all those mentioned above for the views expressed in my book. I take full responsibility for its contents.

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Chapter 1

Problems of Igbo Studies: An Overview of Existing Methodologies

The increasing interest researchers are showing in Igbo history has created a corresponding need for a critical review of their methodologies and analytic assumptions which may promote scholarship and lead to the development of new techniques of historical inquiry. The review may in addition, contribute to a better understanding of the history of the Igbo and other “stateless peoples” and thereby help in enriching our knowledge of the African past.

Anthropologists dominated the study of Igbo history and culture before the 1950s. Some of them like C. K. Meek and M. Green were commissioned by the colonial administration to help in finding solutions to the problems that had bedevilled the system of indirect rule after the Aba Women’s Revolt of 1929. They adopted the synchronic (horizontal) approach in their research, and used the knowledge gained from the study of Igbo society in its modern setting and within a single time framework to make extrapolations on its past history. Because of their orientation, the synchronists assumed that the Igbo lived in a stateless or acephalous society which lacked a central organ of government.¹ S. Stevenson’s critical evaluation of their assumptions is insightful:

In a relatively stable and homogenous society such an attempt [based on the synchronic approach], might bear meaningful results; but in a society where rapidly developing trade and commerce was, and had for a long time been, creating wide differences in wealth, power, and status, traditionally sanctioned authority and de facto power are likely in practice to be widely divergent – even apart from post colonial changes.²

Although the synchronic approach has attracted the criticism of many scholars, its assumptions are being perpetuated in recent times by researchers like R. Horton and D. Northrup.³ Horton’s work, for example, is relevant to this study since he discussed his methodology in detail. Horton adopted the “conflict and equilibrium model” in his study of the dynamics of Igbo society. He then claimed after discussing his model, that the Igbo did not possess a central organ of law - arbitration and, thus, when conflicts arose amongst them, their lineages allied against one another until an equilibrium was restored.⁴

4 Problems of Igbo Studies: An Overview of Existing Methodologies

Horton's mechanical interpretation of conflict-resolution among the Igbo, ignores the fact that they had a complex system of jurisprudence. As will be shown in Chapter 3, there were crimes associated with abominations for which one was held absolutely responsible and liable for one's actions. Thus, whenever such violations occurred, the Igbo had institutionalized mechanisms for enforcing the law which transcended lineage alliances. In addition, contrary to Horton's typology, it has been argued in this research that the Igbo evolved a centralized political system as evidenced by their mini states or chiefdoms and few mega states or kingdoms. Horton's typology, is similar to that of M. Fortes and E. Evans-Pritchard which has been criticized by G. I. Jones because it is based on the state and stateless systems. The typology does not take into consideration the middle level political systems or mini states which existed in the past, in Igboland and other parts of Africa.⁵

Finally, it is important to point out that the Igbo were until recently, mainly cultivators who lived in nucleated settlements in the forest region. Their population density before colonialism, was remarkably high in comparison with those of other African peoples. The Igbo also participated actively in both the slave and palm oil trade and were colonized in the 20th century. Ecological, demographic, economic and other factors are, therefore, critical for understanding the dynamics of their society. But, because of the limitations his methodology imposed on him, Horton failed to relate his work to these factors. Instead, he only discussed conflicts and the way lineages were assumed to have responded to them in Igbo society.

The Diachronic or Evolutionary Approach

The shortcomings of the synchronic approach suggest that it lacks historical perspective. An historian is mainly interested in explaining the diverse changes that have taken place in a society over time. He can hardly achieve his objective if he assumes that an equilibrium exists in that society. Unlike Horton's work, this study is based on the diachronic (vertical/evolutionary) approach which has been fruitful in explaining the dynamics of Igbo society.⁶ Admittedly, some of the theories derived from the diachronic approach have in the past, been misused by social Darwinists

who claim that there is a unilinear process of human evolution. But their misguided application of the diachronic approach has not diminished its significance in historical research.

The diachronic approach recognizes that every society has its own peculiarities and patterns of adaptation to its environment.⁷ The processes of human adaptation are, therefore, not unilinear but multi-linear and it is the responsibility of every researcher to discover the evolutionary patterns of the society he is studying. This study will be related to four dimensions of social change in Ngwaland. They are the time-dimension, the external and internal forces of transformation (the external and internal dimensions respectively) and the emerging changes within the internal environment.

Time Dimension

The importance of time dimension in a diachronic study cannot be over-emphasized. Unless time dimension is taken into consideration and events are discussed chronologically, a researcher may create the misleading impression that the society he is studying has not changed over time. This work will be concerned with three periods of Ngwa history, viz: the pre-historic period associated with population movements and other themes; the protohistoric period dealing with the trans-Atlantic trade; and the modern period characterized by diverse events ranging from the advent of colonialism to the Nigerian civil war. As will be shown later, Ngwa society underwent different changes during each period.

The External Forces of Transformation

It is a myth to assume that there is a pure society which has not been influenced by its external environment. Changes may occur in a society as a result of military invasions, trade and other factors. The important thing is for a researcher to specify those factors within the external environment which are fundamental for understanding the changes he is studying. Amongst the Ngwa, for example, they include population movements into their territory, the overseas trade and colonialism.