

## **Igbo History and the Battle for Survival**

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The Igbo here refer to the people who inhabit the Southeast geo-political zone of Nigeria as well as those in Ikwerreland of Rivers State and the Igbo west of the Niger in Delta State. For a historical perspective of a people for a period spanning several millennia, the task is certainly not an easy one. The exercise is further confounded in the case of Igboland where there is a dearth of written material for the period before the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The late D.H. Jones (1976) of the School of Oriental and African Studies of the University of London, had cause to observe that Igbo history was “a neglected and very intractable area of enquiry”. Afigbo (1975) lamented that very little had been done in the area of Igbo history, unlike the situation in other Nigerian culture-groups such as the Edo, Yoruba and Hausa. According to him, the effort of the pioneer Igbo historians had made no significant contribution to what he styled the “essential history” of the Igbo, that is, the history of our forefathers in the centuries before the European interruption and invasion. The pioneering works that touched on the Igbo concentrated on the European activities and their effect on the Igbo.

But, it must be said in favour of the eminent Igbo historians (Profs Dike, Anene, Ifemesia, among others) that they faced enormous difficulties and obstacles. These historians were brought up in the best traditions of Western philosophy and methodology of historical investigation. African historians had relied very much in the past on conventional methods, that is, on written records. Benin and, to some extent, Yorubaland had comparatively early contact with the Europeans and therefore there are bound to be some written accounts from European sources on the Edo and Yoruba. Kanem - Borno and Hausaland had known Islam between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. Islam had brought with it literacy in Arabic. Arab teachers, travellers and explorers have bequeathed to us valuable accounts from which historians have freely drawn upon.

The first European visitors to Igboland did not penetrate into the interior until 1830. John and Richard Lander were the first Europeans to travel down the lower Niger down to the Niger Delta, in 1830. They had travelled inland from Badagry until they reached the Niger at Bussa. From Bussa, they traveled down the Niger by canoe and were taken captive at Asaba in November 1830 and eventually ransomed by a Brass prince who delivered them to an English ship captain. It was after this period that life in the Igbo interior began to appear in European accounts, Igbo historians have had, therefore, to concentrate on Igbo history for the period they could get written material.

Besides, some of the Nigerian communities which attracted historical investigation, had kings and royal chroniclers with accumulated store of local history over the centuries. The so-called kingdoms and empires were generally more attractive to historians than the “fragmentary societies” into which the Igbo have often been grouped.

However, historians are now agreed that Western notion of historical methodology or approach is grossly inadequate for areas such as Igboland. Some of those disciplines such as archaeology, linguistics, ethnology, etc, have been called to service. With the help of these disciplines, great strides have been taken in the last decade in recovering Igbo history.

### **Origin and migration**

An area of Igbo history that has provoked considerable interest is the question of Igbo origins and migrations. The theories of Igbo origins can be divided into three broad categories: Oriental, Niger/Benue, and Igbo homeland or independent origins (Ijoma, 1984).

### **The Oriental Hypothesis**

The theory was put forward that the Igbo came from the East. Some commentators had speculated that the Igbo were either one of the last “tribes” of Israel or Egypt and that for some inexplicable circumstances, they left the East and wandered across until they finally came to their present abode. The exponents of this theory found similarity of culture between that of the Igbo and some of the Eastern peoples. Circumcision,

system and manner of naming children, sentence structure and similarity in some words, religion and ritual symbols, love of adventure and enterprise were used to explain derivation from the East. Even as late as April 1984, one Dr. Chuks Osuji (1984, p.2) claimed in an article in the Sunday Statesman that:

Some scattered efforts have been made to investigate origin of the Igbo man. Some of these efforts have yielded some positive results. All of them have traced the origin of the Igbos to Hebrew. Many foreign scholars working independently have earlier given clue to this fact. They have associated the overwhelming characteristics of the Igbos to those of the Jews.

Olaudah Equiano, an Igbo ex-slave and an eighteenth century commentator on Igbo society, links the Igbo with the Jews (Edwards, 1967, p.12). G.T. Basen (1912) has also opined that:

the investigator cannot help being struck with the similitude between them (the Igbo) and some of the ideas and practices of the Levitical Code.

The Aro, in particular, were believed to have derived from an alien stock because of the level of socio-political organization the Aro had reached at the time of British invasion. The Nri were also attributed to culture carriers of Eastern provenance (Jeffreys, 1956). These speculations have no historical basis.

### **Niger/Benue Confluence Area Theory**

Some scholars, among whom Professor A.E. Afigbo (1981), have contended that the Igbo migrated from the Niger/Benue confluence area. The Niger/Benue confluence idea of Igbo origin would appear to have been introduced after the rich NOK archaeological finds and other discoveries connected with the area. The attribution of Igbo origins to the area has been based mainly on linguistic theory. Thus, it has been claimed, without circumstantial evidence, that all speakers of the Kwa sub-family of languages such as the Ijo, Edo, Yoruba, Idoma, Nupe, Igala, etc. dispersed from the general area of the Niger/Benue confluence region. It is said that the speakers of these languages had initially lived in this (Niger/Benue) area before they dispersed to their present locations in parts of West Africa. A plausible explanation has not been offered

why this spot must be regarded as the birth place of the Kwa family of languages. Certainly, the Kwa speakers could and may have dispersed from anywhere else.

The proponents of the Niger/Benue confluence theory have also used the antiquity of yam cultivation and the importance of yam in the Igbo culture area to support their argument. It has been asserted that yams would not thrive well in the rain forest – the present Igbo environment – because they need sufficient light. It is therefore claimed that the forest-savanna borderlands are best suited for yam cultivation. But we have evidence of wild yams thriving in the forest zone. For example, two such species, *Dioscorea adorotissima* and *Dioscorea pracchen sillis* are known to exist. The yam, as it is well known, is a creeping plant and the stems quickly climb even tall trees in the forest environment in search of sunlight.

### **The Igbo Homeland Hypothesis**

There is finally the theory of early Igbo homeland in the Northern Igbo Plateau. The areas generally identified as primary cores of this settlement are Nri/Awka, Orlu/Owerri and parts of Okigwe. From the heartland, the people migrated to various present day Igbo locations.

Reasons have been put forward to show that those areas appear to have been of early human occupation. The conversion of the natural vegetation of the region from rain forest to derived savanna tends to suggest early settlement and protracted utilization, thus, giving rise to the greater deterioration of the soil than most parts of Igboland except the river valleys. The antiquity of the present sites can also be inferred from the people's oral traditions and sayings. They generally do not possess migration stories which derive the people far from their immediate environment.

Archaeology has also provided some clues regarding human habitation and exploitation of the long plateau. Archaeological excavations in the Ezi-Ukwu Ukpa Rock shelter, near Afikpo, have produced stone tools and pottery sherds whose radiocarbon dates ( $2935 \pm 15$  B.C.) reveal human activity in tht part of Igboland for several millennia. Similarly artifacts of the same Late Stone Age recovered from Nsukka (Isi-Ugwu Obukpa Rock Shelter and University of Nigeria Agricultural Farm Site) have demonstrated the continuity of human occupation and the material culture

of the people of that area. The dates obtained for the pottery indicate that the pottery is about 4500 years old. We learn from Professor Hartle (1967) that the pottery is similar to what is still made at Nsukka. Shaw's excavations at Igboukwu, within the Awka/Orlu axis, have revealed a high degree of social and political organization which must have taken centuries to achieve before 1000 AD (Shaw, 1970, 1972, 1977). Again, from linguistic evidence, the speaking of Igbo language, probably in its present ecological location, has a great time depth and must have lasted thousands of years (Bradbury, 1964; Ifemesia, 1980). The present writer accepts the idea of Igbo homeland and rejects the Niger/Benue confluence hypothesis because it lacks convincing evidence.

The migrations from the core area took many directions southwards to the coast, south-southeast into Ngwaland and from here to Ikwerreland, east into the Umuahia area and then to the Ohafia-Arochukwu ridge. On getting to Arochukwu, the expansion would appear to have been blunted with a recoil northwards to develop into the north eastern Igbo of Afikpo, Ezaa, Ikwo and Izii. From the Nri/Awka/Orlu area, there would seem to have been movements westwards across the Niger to found the west Niger Igbo communities.

On the other hand, the traditions of most Igbo communities on the west of the Niger and Onitsha on the east bank, tend to derive the people from Benin. A cultural hero, Chima (or Esumeji Ukwu in the case of Aboh), is generally associated with the founding of the following chiefdoms: Obior, Onitsha Ukwu, Onicha Ugbo, Onicha Olona, Issele Ukwu, Issele Mkpime, Issele Azagba, Ezi, Obamkpa and Aboh, among others, on the west bank of the Niger and Onitsha on the east. The founding father, Eze Chima or Esumeji, is reputed to have been a prince from the royal house of Benin and had migrated with his followers because of a dispute over succession or trespass. Those who accept the Edo descent of the founding fathers of the chiefdoms use monarchical and title institutions found in these areas to buttress their argument. It has often been claimed that the Igbo make no king (Igbo echi eze). But the names of the founding fathers, the basic customs and the language are Igbo and yet the chiefdoms, apart from Onitsha, are neighbours of the Edo and are separated from the rest of the Igbo by the Niger.

It is not unlikely that some kingship emblems may have been borrowed from Benin. This is not unusual from neighbouring communities. A distinction need to be made between the origin of the people and the origin of some political institutions. Nor are we certain that monarchy in this area is as a result of the early contact with Benin. Some observers have created the impression that Igbo people have always been kingless (Ijoma, 1984, 1989, 1992, 1997). But the Igboukwu excavations tend to debunk this notion. One of the sites contained a store-house or shrine for the keeping of vessels and regalia. Another site was identified as probably the burial chamber of some dignitary, dressed in royal regalia and surrounded by treasures. One foot rested on an elephant tusk. These finds have been linked with the Eze Nri or Oreri (Shaw, 1970). Nri, which is not far from Igboukwu, is known to have kingship institution from time and occupies an important place in Igbo history. In fact, Ifemesia (1980, pp 50-51) has suggested that, contrary to received notion, regal influence may have dispersed from Igboukwu, or Nri for that matter, to Igala and/or Benin. He has also pointed out that even those parts of Igboland where there are no kings today, sometimes have traditions of the existence of kingship at an ancient period. It would, therefore, be wrong to attribute the existence of monarchy among the Igbo, whether east or west of the Niger, to entirely Benin influence.

In all probability, anyway, the bulk of west Niger Igbo communities crossed from the east of the Niger. Like other migrations of the Igbo from the Igbo heartland, it is difficult to date when the migrations took place.

### **Pre-Colonial Economic activities**

Over the centuries, the Igbo showed dynamism in their technology and their quest to improve their lot and environment. Contrary to wrongful notions created by European observers at the turn of 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Igbo were not stagnant. Early enough, they acquired the knowledge of iron working and this helped them to overcome the ecological difficulties of the forest environment. Awka in particular showed great dexterity in iron technology. The Nkwere and Abiriba were also famous smiths. The smiths produced household items and farming implements such as knives, nails, hooks, files, chisels and tongs, hammers, spears, and guns at a later stage.

The Igbo Ukwu archaeological excavations certainly reveal great antiquity and skill in metal working among the Igbo. The metal work in Igboukwu finds include 575 minor copper and bronze objects of high quality. Among the iron objects were drawn wire, pieces of slag, staples, blades of small knives, razor, clamps and nails which, according to Shaw (1970, 19977), suggest a nearby smelting and smithing industry. Prof. Hartle's archaeological excavations in the Awka area also produced 15 iron gongs and an iron sword, as well as a large number of cast bronze bells. The radio carbon date for these digs is  $1495 \pm 95$  A.D. (Hartle, 1968).

The Awka smiths and, indeed, smiths from other Igbo communities were itinerant craftsmen who either sold or practised their crafts in parts of Igboland and beyond. Thus, James Barbot (1746), who visited the Niger Delta towards the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century tells us that he acquired swords of Igbo manufacture there. Rev. Hope Waddell (1863, p.468) also saw Awka smiths at Calabar in 1850. The industry would appear to have been shared by the Igbo on both sides of the Niger. In 1901, G.T.Basden saw one of the western Igbo smiths who made a needle out of a piece of old knife, the eye and point all complete without being filed or ground. The supply of European products such as knives, iron pots, hooks, hoes, guns and iron bars from the coast must have improved the quality and quantity of the output of the local smiths, as some of them tried to imitate the imported items.

The charcoal needed for the furnaces was no real problem. Dead trees were easily found and burnt into charcoal. The forge of the smith and the shed of the carver were in separate huts from the main house. The rainy season, when little farm work was done, was a busy period for smiths and carvers, although very skilled and successful ones in time practised their trade on full time basis.

Pottery was an important occupation undertaken by women in Afikpo (Ebonyi State) and Okigwe in Imo State and in Ishiagu, Nsukwa, and Ewuru in Delta State, among other Igbo communities. The potters produced a wide variety of the earthen ware – cooking pots, bowls, mugs, water jugs and containers, traditional pipes and udu (musical instrument for women). The big pots were, and are still, used for storage of corn, raw and processed, cassava and palm oil. The making of pots was usually

carried out by individual women, but the firing could embrace other members of the family. The clay was obtained from banks of rivers.

The tradition of pot industry appears to go back in time. We have referred to the finds at Nsukka which are over 4000 years old. The antiquity of pottery is also borne out by Shaw's excavations at Igbo Ukwu. Over 20,000 pieces of pottery were recovered from the sites. Shaw says (1970), pp 222-3).

The characteristic Igbo Ukwu ware... has a marvelous wealth of form and decoration, executed with great verve of boldness. It gives the impression of some delight in exploiting to the full the possibility of the ceramic medium as is shown by the bronze casters in using the refined possibilities of the *cire perdue* process... There seem to be no parallels to Igbo Ukwu ware known from excavations at Benin or Ife.

Thus, pottery in Igboland had reached an advanced stage in Igbo Ukwu times, a thousand years ago. Some of the pots with narrow necks, which were recovered from the sites, resemble the water pots of today.

Weaving of cloth and basket industry were a gainful employment in Igboland, particularly in Akwaete (Abia State) and Ubulu Ukwu (Delta State). The weaving of cloth was done on a narrow but simple loom installed in a corner of a room. In cloth weaving communities, a girl was expected to start learning the trade at an early age – cloth weaving was exclusively a woman's trade.

Writing about the pursuits of Igbo women, Equino tells us that (Edwards, 1967, p 4):

When women are not employed with the men in village, their usual occupation is spinning and weaving cotton, which they afterwards dye and make into garments. They also manufacture earthen vessels, of which we have many kinds.

When I. Spencer (1879) and his party visited a west Niger town, Ubulu Ukwu; in March 1878, they found

that the inhabitants are very industrious, they weave cloth of every description, some of which is nearly equal to civilized making in texture.

Miss E.A. Warner (1901) also saw the Akwukwu (Western Igbo) women spin and weave elaborately.

In the 1850s, Baikie (1856, pp 287-8) found well woven cloth on the Benue near its confluence with the Niger which had been exported from Igboland. In the 1860s, the Christian missionaries bought a kind of fancy cloth, said to have been manufactured by the Igbo (Church Intelligencer, 1867, p 158).

The material for weaving was not always cotton; palm leaves and bark of trees were also used. Of these, Basden (1966, p 327) reports thus:

Fresh green palm leaves furnish a fibre almost as fine as a spun silk... It is the finest texture of fibre used for weaving... One example of fine weaving may be mentioned and this, again, comes from western (Igbo) side. Beneath the bark of young branches of the “ufa” tree species of down is found. This is gathered and spun similarly to cotton.

Shaw’s Igboukwu finds also include textiles of two different types – one of grass or leaf fibres and the other similar to cotton (Shaw, 1970, pp 240-44).

There was also the making of mats, baskets and fans. For mats, there were two types – the thick and coarse fabric made from fronds of raphia palm and the soft tender and glossy kind made from rushes. Plaiting was made on the floor of the mat maker’s house. Ordinary fans were produced by mat makers from the rushes. Baskets were also widely produced from palm fronds and canes. The products included fishing and farmer’s wicker baskets and trays and shallow baskets made of thinly split cane, while the strong ones were woven from ata, spear grass. Bags, ropes and twine were equally produced.

The Igbo people also undertook some carving. The products included boxes of various sizes with decorated surfaces; ofo, staff of office and justice, stools, representations of household gods and gods of fortune, Ikenga,. Other products of carvers were ufie, wooden drum and gong, wooden bowls for washing hands, heavy mortars and pestles for pounding fofou and for palm oil extraction, small mortars and pestles for cosmetics (ufie and uri). Wooden calabashes and gourds were carved into plates, dishes, spoons, cups and water containers. Canoe building was another viable occupation in the riverine areas. The Landers (1832) had noted in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that

all the large canoes plying the Delta rivers from Benin to Calabar were built at Aboh on the west bank of the Niger. There might have been some exaggeration in this, but it does give an indication of canoe building industry going on in the area long before the visit of the Landers.

Like most areas of tropical Africa, agriculture was the mainstay of the people's economy. We have alluded to the importance of yam in the Igbo culture area. Nri traditions assert that yam cultivation is as old as the foundation of Nri itself (Thomas, 1913). Traditions of other Igbo communities also assert that yam cultivation is both ancient and important. Shaw (1970, p. 284) has suggested that the Igbo society, in which the Igboukwu treasures flourished, probably supported itself on a diet in which yam and palm nuts were important. From Pacheco Pereira (1937) we learn that large quantities of yams were brought in the 15<sup>th</sup> century to the Niger Delta in trade canoes from the interior. Other important crops cultivated by the Igbo included pumpkin (*Cucur bita pepo C. maxima*), fluted pumpkin (*Telfairia occidentalis*), melon, okra, garden egg, pepper, guinea corn and winged bean, all regarded as of West African origin.

Exotic crops are banana, plantains, sugarcane, cotton, two races of yam, cocoyam (*Colocasia esculentum*) from S.E. Asia, tomato, pine-apple, some varieties of pepper and cassava from S. America; a variety of cocoyam (*Xyanthosoma sagittifolium*) from the West Indies. Cassava, it must be emphasized, does not appear to have been widespread until the beginning of this century. The account of John Barbot (1746) shows that cassava was cultivated in the Niger Delta by the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Because of the high mortality rate resulting from poor knowledge of processing of cassava, the people were slow in adopting it as a major item of food. Today, Nigeria is the second largest producer, after Zaire, of cassava in the world.

Regarding the economic pursuits of the Igbo, Equiano (Edwards, 1967), tells us that

Agriculture is our chief employment, and everyone even the children and women, are engaged in it.

and he goes further to assert that

Our land is uncommonly rich and fruitful. All our industry is exerted to improve those blessings of nature.

It is perhaps instructive that since the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, agriculture has been so much relegated to the background that Nigerians are living on the edge of starvation.

Land among the Igbo was not commercialized until the European intervention. The sanction against the sale of land arose from the general belief that land was a sacred trust held by the present generation of users on behalf of the dead ancestors of the group as well as on behalf of the unborn generations. This belief is attested to by the following reaction of a northern Igbo group, the Nike, in the 1920s. When the government offered the Nike the sum of £230 in return for a piece of land it required for the construction of a military base in the area, the people agreed to give land but not to take the money. The people argued that if they took the money, their crops would fail (see File EP 4131, National Archives, Enugu). At the same time, however, land at Onitsha and one or two other areas that were increasingly assuming urban character was being commercialized. It may be observed that land was neither completely communal nor individualistic among the Nigerian communities as Oluwasanmi has remarked. The rights of the group and those of the individual existed side by side within the same system of tenure (Oluwasanmi, 1966, p 25; see also Chubb, 1961, pp 9-56).

The Igbo, like other Nigerian communities, had engaged in exchange of goods from time, both within and outside their areas. Markets were, and still are, held in a cycle of four days – eke, orie, afo and nkwo. Markets were styled eke ukwu, (big eke); eke nta (small eke); orie ukwu (big orie), and so on. Big markets were held at 8-day intervals and were generally fuller because of the presence of traders from neighbouring villages and towns. If two neighbouring villages or village groups had their markets on the same day, one was small while the other was a big market. The temporal and spatial organization of markets reduced the incidence of clashes and the cost of both collection and distribution. Ukwu (1967, p 649) has opined that periodic markets developed out of the Igbo concept of the rest day. According to him, most of the local festivals and ceremonies fall on rest days. His assertion that periodic markets

developed out of the Igbo concept of rest days must be taken with caution. By his own admission, in the same paper, the people's tradition claims that the central markets in the communities are as old as the settlements themselves. It is perhaps more plausible to suggest that as early as the people became sedentarized, they began to gather at the village squares to exchange their surplus farm produce and crafts for those items they lacked. With time, and in the light of the people's experience, the marketing activities were rationalized in order to minimize cost and wastes. The Igbo farmer took his rest in the farm or at home. The residential houses were not far from the farms. Moreover, huts were erected in the farms where the farmers rested when they were tired or took shelter during rains or intense heat. It would, in fact, appear that market days in time became rest days and not the vice versa. In Arochukwu, burials, marriages and other major events could not take place on nkwo day, the main market day in the town. A man who threw out the belongings of his wife from the matrimonial home on nkwo day, indicated that the marriage had completely broken down and therefore beyond redemption. Thus, the market day was declared holy.

It does appear that at the early stage, exchange in the Igbo towns and villages was mainly in foodstuffs-exchange of goods for goods. In time, cowries, salt and other traditional currencies were also used. The local markets were dominated by women. Men also went to buy and sell their crafts and yam seeds.

Trade among the Igbo was however not limited to inter and intra village affair. The Igbo also traded with other Igbo and non-Igbo neighbours, a trade relationship that must have existed centuries before the British occupation of Igboland. There were certainly trade links between the Igbo and their northern neighbours. The Nsukka people, for example, traded through overland routes with the Igala and Akpoto in Benue State. The Igala are said to have brought in horses, goats and beads in exchange for slaves and finished cotton cloth and later palm oil (Afigbo, 1973a, p.87). There are pockets of Aro settlements at Ibagwa and other areas of Nsukka whose forebears had helped to tap the trade of Nsukka and its Northern neighbours.

Apart from the overland routes, the Niger was a great artery of communication between the Igbo and their northern and southern neighbours. It was used extensively for trade. Thurstan Shaw's excavations at Igboukwu give some clues regarding the

long distance trade in Igboland. His finds include over 1300 iron, copper and bronze objects and more than 165,000 pieces of glass and stone beads. The radio carbon dates of the artifacts indicate that they are over a thousand years (900 A.D.) old. In discussing the wide implications of his digs on Igbo economic history, Shaw has suggested that the copper used in the bronze objects was of Saharan or trans-Saharan origin, while large quantities of beads were of Indian manufacture. The craft of Igboukwu, Shaw has further remarked, was therefore linked with commercial contact with the outside world. In return for the goods, the Igbo provided ivory, a commodity which the Islamic world wanted from tropical Africa (Shaw, 1970, pp 271-285; 1977, pp 186-7). Thus, by the 10<sup>th</sup> century A.D., the Igbo may have attracted wealth as represented by the imported copper and beads. These riches imply an exchange of goods carried over long distances which terminated their journey on the Niger. It may perhaps be mentioned that the Onwuejeogwus (1976) have suggested that the copper may have been of local provenance, not imported.

Asaba would appear to have been a centre of networks of riverine and overland trade routes. Traders from the north, Igala and beyond, and those from the south, Aboh and the Niger Delta states converged there. The “natives of Benin came to trade by land”, Allen and Thomson (1949) tell us. The market was held on a sand bank during the dry season and in canoes in the rainy season.

Trade on the Niger certainly predated the coming of the Europeans. The European visitors to the Bights of Benin and Biafra at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century and after reported the enormous trade going on in the Niger (Pereira, 1937, p 132; Dapper, 1686, p 316). Trade canoes from the delta traveled up the river to Onitsha, Asaba and beyond to the Igala Kingdom for foodstuffs in exchange for salt and dried fish. From the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, the trade with the coastal states increased because of more European ships coming to the delta.

The main staples of the trade were slaves, ivory and palm oil in exchange for European products. One of the Igbo towns that exploited the thriving trade on the Niger was Aboh on the apex of the delta. Laird and Oldfield (1831) described the Aboh traders as the “most enterprising and industrious traders on the Niger”, who carried on “an extensive trade in palm oil, and slaves with traders from Bonny, Benin

and Brass” (see also Allen & Thomson, 1848, p 237; R & J. Lander, 1832; III, p 1835; Ogedengbe, 1971). Osomala too, took active part in this trade. The inability of Aboh to adjust to the changing pattern of trade in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was a contributory factor in the town’s decline.

By and large, an Igbo group that would appear to have taken full advantage of the commercial opportunities of the pre-colonial era were the Aro. Arochukwu is situated on the borderland between the Igbo and the Cross River peoples and lies at the edge of a ridge running east and south-southeast from the central Igbo upland area. The Aro were pre-eminently traders. Oral tradition of the Aro and some delta states seem to suggest that the Aro and their oracle, Ibiniukpabi, were already known in the Niger delta much earlier than the 18<sup>th</sup> century (G.I. Jones, 1963,p 134). It does appear, therefore, that a degree of long distance trade and the conducting of those who wanted to consult the Ibiniukpabi had developed early enough between the Aro and the delta states. What the trans-Atlantic trade did was probably to increase the volume and scope of the contact (Ijoma, 1986).

The Aro trade was a well organized affair. The Aro charted trade routes throughout the length and breadth of what became south-eastern (Umo, 1948). Many had declined in the last fifty years, but particularly so since the Nigerian civil war. Aro Ndizuogu and Ajalli (Ujari), among others, are still thriving settlements. Generally, the settlements were drawn from different villages and families of Arochukwu since the people had their spheres of influence where they concentrated their trading activities. Thus, the scattered settlements in present Rivers State, known as Aro Ikwerre, were drawn from Atani village. It is perhaps pertinent to mention, as Felicia Ekejiuba (1972, p 15) has done, that Aro communities are found mainly in areas where population is less concentrated. In fact, Aro traditions in the colonies talk of wiping out the existing populations, if the people resisted Aro settlements. This could only be possible if the local population was sparse in spite of whatever military might the Aro might master. Again, as rightly observed by Ekejiuba (1972, p 15).

The direction of Aro penetration relates to the regions of specialization of crafts and goods in the region – for the Aro were determined to find trade goods and establish new markets.

Thus, the Aro tended to tap the resources of the place they passed through in their trading activities. They also relied on informants, some of whom were slaves. The point has often been made that the Aro were merely notorious slave dealers. As traders, they exploited whatever trading opportunities that offered themselves.

In order to have an undisturbed flow of traffic, they entered into covenants, *igba-ndu*, with the leaders of the communities they passed through or settled in. These leaders ensured that the Aro troupes were not molested or robbed. The Aro, on their part, paid token tolls or made presents from time to time to the leaders. The Aro oracle, *Ibiniukpabi*, was also called to service. Because of the respect and prestige which the Aro enjoyed as the owners of the oracle, the Aro moved freely, since any harm to the Aro could incur the anger and wrath of the oracle. Indeed, Professor Dike claimed (1956, pp 40-41), that the majority of slaves traded in the eastern delta and Calabar were obtained through the oracle. The assertion would appear to be rather over-stretched because although the majority of slaves may well have passed through the Aro trade network, it appears that the oracle did not play the staggering role often assigned to it by commentators in procuring slaves for the trans-Atlantic trade (Ijoma, 1994).

Apart from the use made of covenants and *Ibiniukpabi* in the prosecution of the trade, the services of warrior-groups, namely the *Ohafia*, *Abam* and *Edda* were engaged. It must be stressed that the Aro invited these groups as a last resort, since the Aro realized that trade and commerce could only thrive in a peaceful atmosphere. They could only be called upon when a peaceful penetration failed or the Aro felt that they had not been fairly treated by a particular community and could not get a reparation for an injury to the Aro either in the settlements or in the course of their trading activities. It is misleading to label the war-groups as mercenaries. They sought glory and honour in warfare and only intervened when invited to do so. The material reward was secondary, at least, before the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Ijoma, 1994).

However, the Aro trade and influence began to wane from the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century because of the increased European activities in the hinterland. But the Aro

roads and centres of trade continued to be patronized up to the first three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Socio-political organization**

It is difficult to provide a clear picture of this for the period before British intervention as there were some variations from one Igbo community to another. But the bulk of the people lived in villages which were further divided into smaller exogamous units called umunna, ogbe, idumu, ezi (lineages). The number of these lineages often depended upon the size and history of a particular village. In certain cases, the villages grew into towns and chiefdoms. Members were expected to desist from offences that might incur the displeasure of the living or dead members of the lineage or village. All serious disputes that could not be resolved at the family or lineage level were taken to a higher body, the council of the village or town. Decisions were by consensus after consultations. Moral pressure was exerted on offending individuals; fines could also be imposed. In some extreme cases, covenants (igba ndu) and oath-taking were prescribed. Generally, people saw the wisdom of accepting mediation either by family members, friends or elders.

Age-grade organization formed one of the pivots for ordering the affairs of Igbo society in the pre-colonial period and after. It offered opportunity for leadership. The male population and the female as well in some Igbo areas were divided into broad age-grades and sets, people born within two or three years. There was a logical basis for this division. There are tasks which old men; women and young ones cannot perform. The age-grades and sets of between about 18 and 45 years were the real working group that tackled arduous tasks. Their assistance was sought by creditors to recover debts, at times using mmanwu masquerade. They also formed a sort of constabulary to enforce the orders of the elders. Occasionally, they constituted themselves into pressure groups and demanded the passing of new laws to help in guarding and guiding public morality. They organized music and dance and other forms of recreational activities. In this way, the activities of the age-grade organization transcended village and clan boundaries.

Another method of maintaining peace and discipline was the use made of title associations. From Olaudah Equiano we learn that every transaction of government was conducted by the chiefs and elders. He tells us of “judges and senators” who were apparently titled men. Captain John Adams who made a number of voyages to the Niger Delta in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century confirmed the existence of title holders in Igboland. In some Igbo areas, the titles were generally bought from existing title holders. In others, the titles were conferred for distinguished service or attainment. The possession of a title was a manifestation of increase in wealth, prestige and good sense. But the title holders and the community demanded that an aspirant must have acquired his wealth honestly, a condition which was not difficult to find out where everybody knew everybody else. Acquisition of titles had its moral responsibilities and obligations. We can compare this situation with the modern trend where “money bags” and people of questionable character are conferred with titles because of financial inducement.

The titled men were, and are still, referred to as “*Ndi Nze*” and the status and privilege as “*Nze na Ozo*”. Let us stress here that the *Ozo* title was prevalent in Anambra and parts of present Enugu and Imo States. In the West of the Niger, they had a number of ranked titles but the highest was the *Eze* title and the holder was called Obi. In Abia and parts of Ebonyi States, they had the *Ekpe* society which had people of substance as members. Wealthy men could also pre-empt or buy membership for their young children or children of friends and relations. The *Ekpe* society played a vital role in maintaining law and order in the society. The language of music and dance was Efik. Since the colonial period, these Igbo institutions (council of Umunna or village, nmanwu, age-grade organization, title associations) have tended to change in character and usage as people now have recourse to civil courts. Perhaps, it may be pertinent to stress that there were, and still are, monarchical institutions in Onitsha, Arochukwu, Oguta, Aboh, Nri and West Niger Igbo communities before the British invasion of Igboland. With the occupation of Igboland and the subsequent planting of indirect rule system whereby warrant chiefs were created, many communities have now their own eze, dating back to nearly a century.

In the recent past, there has been the clamour for the creation of autonomous communities and proliferation of eze institution.

### **The Igbo and their Neighbours**

The Igbo are surrounded by the Edo to the west, the Ijo, Urhobo and Isoko to the south and southwest. To the east are the Efik/Ibibio groups and to the north are the Igala, Idoma and the Tiv. Probably, the Edo and Igala played major roles in the affairs of the Igbo than the other neighbouring groups. The traditions of the Igbo towns and villages bordering these two groups recount their encounters with the Edo and Igala.

Indeed, contact between the Igbo and the Igala appears to be of great antiquity. Igala oral tradition says that their first Achadu (head of 'Gala Mela, the king makers) was an Igbo hunter who became the consort of the pro-dynastic Ata Gala, Ebelejonu. He had rescued the Igala from the menace of a dangerous snake (Boston, 1968). We learn from Bishop Crowther (in the Church Missionary Intelligencer and Record, 1876, p 536) that Ossomari (Osomala) on the left bank of the Niger was peopled by the Igala originally as a trading station or market. The northern Umueri, on the left bank of the Omambala river, a tributary of the Niger, say they were founded by a hunter or war leader from Igala who settled first at Aguleri before his descendants fanned out (Nzekwu, 1960; Idigo, 1955; Oguagha, 1983). On the other hand, Nri traditions say that the children of Eri in Aguleri founded Umueri towns and Igala (Jeffreys, 1956). The Igala sources speak of conquest of Igala's border towns as far south as the northern part of Nsukka on the left side and Asaba on the right side by the legendary Onoja Oboni who lived most of the time at Ogwurugwu (Boston, 1960). Onitsha folklore also claims that Igala fishermen ferried the first Onitsha indigenes who crossed from the west-bank of the Niger to settle on the east. These traditions underline centuries of social, political and economic ties between the Igala and other northern neighbours of the Igbo on the one hand and the Igbo on the other.

Among the Nsukka, for example, the cultural interaction is manifested in vocabulary, titles, masquerades and facial marks. Indeed, during the Nigerian civil war, some Nsukka people had to embark on giving facial marks to the young ones in

order to disguise themselves and save the people from the wrath of federal troops occupying their territory. Like the Igala, the priest is known as atama.

The Niger was an artery of communication and intercourse between the Igbo and the Igala as well as between the Igbo and other neighbouring peoples near the Niger. The Onitsha/Asaba sandbank, as has been remarked above was, for centuries, a commercial and cultural centre for people from the west, north and south. Some elements of Edo cultural impact can be seen in the west Niger Igbo area and across the Niger. We have alluded to the traditions of the communities in these areas which claim that the people derived from Benin, based on the existence of petty monarchies and chieftaincy institutions. Undoubtedly, some aspects of the Edo monarchy and its organization are present in the monarchies of the western Igbo communities and even of Onitsha. Some of the western Igbo Obi (chiefs) in the pre-colonial period bore Edo names. Certain titles and offices of the political elite among the west Niger Igbo seem to have Benin origins, although it must be stressed that the functions attached to them were not generally the same as in Benin. Thus, such political functionaries as Iyase, Ezomo, Ayobaban; Ihaza, Ologbose, were, and are still, found in the west Niger communities, in Onitsha and even at Ugwuta. The borrowing of names of titles and offices and culture-traits from a powerful neighbour such as Benin can hardly be surprising.

Apart from intercourse engendered by trade there are traditions that rival prices in the Niger Igbo communities appealed to the Oba of Benin from time to time to adjudicate in succession disputes. There are also claims that in certain areas, the Oba presented the Obi an *ada*, staff of office, to symbolize the Obi's authority to rule over the chiefdom. Thus, it may be said that Benin had some relationship of a political nature with many sections of the western Igbo area. The time perspective and the exact character of this relationship are uncertain. But, in all probability, the relationship may have helped to shape the political institutions of the areas affected.

Among the Cross River Igbo, some institutions such as the *Ekpe* (called Okonko in some Igbo areas) and *Ekpo* societies were probably copied from Efik, Ibibio and Ekoi neighbours. The language of the two societies is still Efik among the Cross River Igbo people. The Aro spoke Efik, the language of trade and diplomacy on

the river, fluently and took up some Efik customs and food. The Efik words for pot, cloth, palm oil, matches, etc, were until recently, found in Aro and other Cross River Igbo dialects. Inter-group marriages between the Igbo and non-Igbo neighbours of the Cross River were not uncommon. On the other hand, the Igbo have helped to enrich the food items and the economic activities of their neighbours. We have already alluded to the itinerant Awka, Nkwere and Abiriba smiths whose products enhanced the farming activities of the Igbo and their neighbours. The names of the Igbo 4-day week are found among the Edo and Igala. The relationship between the Igbo and their neighbours was a symbiotic one.

### **Christianity**

A feature of great importance in Igbo history is the coming of Christianity to Igboland in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, although its real import was made more manifest in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

With the discovery of the course and termination of the Niger in 1830 by the Lander Brothers, attempts were made by the British to penetrate into the interior. Three Niger expeditions were sent out in 1841, 1854 and 1856. One of the aims of these expeditions was to establish Church Missionary Society stations on the Niger. But the one that really established the first mission station was that of 1856. Samuel Adjai Crowther, a Yoruba ex-slave, who was also in the 1841 expedition, was appointed the leader of the C.M.S. Niger mission. On July 25, 1857, the mission arrived at Onitsha after a brief stop at Aboh in present Delta state. When the Missionaries and traders arrived, Onitsha was at war with her neighbours particularly with Ogidi, Alor, Obosi and Idah in the north. Because of this political situation, Onitsha people welcomed the party in order to strengthen their position against their hostile neighbours (Crowther & Taylor, 1859; Ekechi, 1972).

The reasons which influenced Crowther to choose Onitsha as the headquarters of the Igbo mission were both political and strategic. According to him the Obi and the people of Onitsha “appeared easy and tractable” (Ekechi, 1972, p 8), unlike what he saw at Aboh, Onitsha also provided better communication facilities with the regions in the north and with other Igbo areas.

John Christopher Taylor, an associate of Crowther and a former pastor of Barthurst Church in the Gambia and a man of Igbo parentage, was left to look after the mission at Onitsha. Taylor and other agents tackled their assignment seriously. Because of his success, he called upon his fellow Sierra Leoneans to join him in the work of evangelization. He was tactful and showed some understanding of the local customs and practices. In order not to offend his hosts, he refrained from denouncing some of their customs. The missionaries recorded their first real conversion in Igboland on November 23, 1862, when 42 converts were baptized. The foundation stone of Christ Church at Onitsha was laid in 1867. Because of the activities of the missionaries and traders at Onitsha, other towns expressed desires to have missionaries in their areas (Ekechi, 1972, pp 12-43).

The Catholic Mission also made Onitsha their first port of call in Igboland. Under the leadership of Father Joseph Lutz, a French missionary, the mission arrived at Onitsha in December, 1885. By 1900, however, it had only two mission stations at Onitsha and Aguleri (Ozigboh, 1983, pp 77-100). But with the presence of the British military expeditions into the Igbo hinterland, the Catholic missionaries were able to spread the gospel much faster in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The Presbyterian (Scottish) Mission, which had established a foothold at Calabar in 1846, had set up a station at Unwana (Afikpo) in 1888 (Isichei, 1976, p 161). It is not surprising that the Scottish Mission is today very much entrenched in Afikpo and parts of the Cross River Igbo because of this early contact. But the history of its real expansion was in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Generally, the intense period of evangelization in Igboland was in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. With the imposition of British rule and the presence of British troops, missionaries were able to expand much quickly. The establishment of British colonial administration led to the opening of several roads. The existence of better roads correspondingly helped in the spread of Christianity. Bicycles and motor vehicles were available, even if in a limited form, and could be used to cover long distances which were previously covered by foot. Another advantage of the presence of the British was the preferential treatment meted out by the British administration to those who embraced Christianity. This was so, for example, in the selection of people for

compulsory free labour for the construction of roads and other services which the British demanded. Because many young men believed that becoming a Christian conferred certain advantages, they quickly joined the church in order to be exempted from compulsory labour (Ekechi, 1972, p 155).

The coming of the Christian missionaries to Igboland had far-reaching effects on the Igbo. They provided western education and some crafts and industries which the Igbo quickly acquired or learnt. They also helped in fighting against certain obnoxious beliefs and practices. On the other hand, Christianity had adverse effects on the institutions and the culture of the people. Because Christianity is culture bound, the missionaries wanted the Igbo society to change the people's way of life. The customs and practices of the people were considered primitive and "pagan". The idea of European cultural superiority was manifested in the actions of the missionaries. Western civilization was equated to Christianity. Thus, Christianity was slow in achieving avowed aims and objectives in Igboland, but with time and by the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Christianity had reached all nooks and crannies

### **Loss of Independence**

From the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the middleman position and the control of the trade on the Niger changed, as European trading vessels, particularly British, began to frequent the Lower Niger. Between 1862 and 1878, four major British trading companies were entrenched on the Niger and in cut-throat competition. In November, 1879, the four companies amalgamated into the United African company under the guiding hand of George Goldie Taubman, who was motivated by commercial and imperial designs. The idea was not only to maximize profits but to squeeze out the French firms which by 1882 had established stations at Onitsha and Aboh as well as 17 floating stations on the Lower Niger. Through commercial and political blackmail, the United African company was able to buy off the French firms by 1884 and renamed the company the National African company (J.E. Flint, 1960; C.H. Currey, 1951). The Lower Niger saw the intensification of political activities pioneered by the company. Between 1884 and 1885, there was a euphoric signing of treaties, ostensibly for "protection" and peaceful trade (see Foreign Office Files: FO

403/75, Nos 18 and 52 on “Treaties with the National African Company, dated 13 July, 1886”). Because of the fear of foreign intervention, particularly the French and German, in the interior and the prodding and entreaties by people like Goldie and missionaries who had claimed that “legitimate” trade and “civilization” could not thrive in an unsettled interior, the British Government declared the Oil Rivers Protectorate in June 1885 (see London Gazette of June, 1885).

Goldie’s National African Company was granted a Royal Charter in 1886 to administer a rather vague territory known as the “Niger Basin”, but a substantial chunk of the newly acquired protectorate. The company pitched its political and military headquarters at Asaba while its commercial headquarters was at Obosi. The relations of the company with the towns on the Niger were far from cordial. The former African trade elite which had monopolized the trade of the interior as middlemen were now being squeezed out by the European presence, which was often aggressive. There were ugly incidents in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century such as the sack of Onitsha, Aboh and Asaba in 1878, 1883 and 1887, respectively, the shelling of Andoni by a British gunboat in 1876, and the trade war between Atani and the company in 1880. King Jaja of Opobo, an astute trader and chief of Igbo descent, was exiled in 1887 in a most cruel and perfidious manner because the British felt that his power and middle-man position had obstructed their direct access to the wealth of the hinterland (Isichei, 1973, pp 118-125; 1976, p 119).

Apart from the collection of signatures and “treaties” by the British administration, this period also witnessed the “pacification” exercise. Both the company and the Southern Nigeria Protectorate, which took over the political and administrative responsibility from 1900, had to contend with resistance movements. From the west Niger Igbo was the Ekumeku, a secret organization, which resisted the British whether in a trading or missionary or political garb. In spite of the brutalities meted out to the people alleged to be behind the organization, resistance in the area, under the umbrella of this underground movement, continued from 1898 to 1911 (Igbafe, 1971; Afigbo, 1973a).

In the encounters with the Igbo, the British had regarded the Aro as the bastion of Igbo resistance. So much has been written on the subject that it is not necessary to

go into that detail here. Suffice it to say that by the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the British were worried that the Aro constituted their main obstacle to the penetration into the Igbo and Ibibio hinterland. There were protracted but futile negotiations between the Aro and the British during the period. By 1899, the British appeared to have exhausted diplomatic initiatives and planned a full scale attack on Arochukwu in order, according to them, to abolish the slave trade and destroy the Ibiniukpabi as well as “open up the whole of the Ibo country to civilization and trade” (Nwabara, 1977).

The occasion for the attack on the Aro was the action the Aro took against the Obegu people for helping the cause of the British. The Aro, being nervous of the massive preparation of the British to attack them, had warned areas in their trading network to desist from any action that might further British interest. The Obegu people would appear to have flouted the instruction, and the Aro sacked the town in November 1901 as an object lesson to other communities. The British stormed and captured the town on December 28, 1901. With the capture of Arochukwu and the destruction of its famous oracle, terrible fear gripped the Igbo and Ibibio communities yet to come under British tutelage. The British themselves built up a powerful propaganda against the Aro after the defeat and mounted military campaigns against one Igbo community after another. But resistance against the British by the Igbo continued until the end of the second decade of 20th century. The British discovered to their consternation that the different Igbo communities cherished their independence and fought for it (Anene, 1955; Afigbo 1973b; Ijoma, 1986). They were not under the political sway of the Aro or any other group. When, at last, the Igbo communities were brought under British political and administrative umbrella, the British attempted to administer Igboland in the way they had done in the north and southwest of modern Nigeria. They met with dismal failure (Afigbo, 1972).

### **Kola-nut custom**

An issue I have been asked to touch upon is the kola-nut custom in Igboland. This is perhaps in recognition of the all-important nature of this custom in spite of inroads made by Christian religion and western civilization. Kola-nut or oji, as it is called, occupies a unique position in the traditional life of Igbo people. It is the first

presentation to any visitor or visitors in any important event: marriage or burial ceremonies, settlement of family, village or town disputes.

There are two types of kola-nut. One is from *Cola acuminata* tree and the other is from *Cola nitida*. Both types have reddish colours. One (Oji ibube) is light grey with reddish tints while the other Oji Igbo (*Cola acuminata*) is cream/whitish in colour. The latter is held in high esteem and is presented to a gathering in even numbers of 2, 4 or 8. Oji Igbo is made up of between 2 and 6 or 7 cotyledons. A kola-nut bearing two cotyledons is generally not acceptable because it was assumed in the past to portend bad omen, including the birth of twins. Most kola-nuts are made up of 4 cotyledons which people believe symbolize the Igbo four-day week of afo, nkwo, eke and orie. But those of 5 to 6 cotyledons are also perceived good because they may bring many childbirths.

As we mentioned earlier, kola-nuts are the first item to be served on any occasion. They are presented to an elder or chairman of the event who may not necessarily be the oldest. The Chairman breaks or directs how the kola-nuts can be handled, including the saying of prayers. These days, an ordained priest may be authorized to bless the kola-nut and the youngest person does the sharing. In Arochukwu, kola-nuts are served in a circular carved receptacle with chalk coating called *okwa oji* or *aria nzu*, accompanied at times with *okwa oso* (sauce). Like many other Igbo communities, the owner of the house or the head of the community kisses the nuts and passes them on to the nearest kinsman and elder for presentation. At Nsukka, all prayers accompanying the kola-nut are said by an indigene as the people regard it an affront for “strangers” to say the prayers in their territory. The importance attached to kola-nuts can be seen from the considerable length of time spent on the sharing process.

In some Igbo communities, Onitsha and riverine areas for instance, elderly women or titled ones who are treated with much consideration are conceded the privilege of breaking kolanuts, even when it is normally the preserve of men. Otherwise *igo oji* is the right of elderly men, the *ozo* men and *ndi eze*.

The kola-nut is used to initiate a discussion and to give thanks to God and ancestors for waking up alive for a new day. It is also to ask God and the ancestors to

help us accomplish our programme and expectation for the day. The absence of kola-nuts in the house can be embarrassing and can spark off a family quarrel because the man feels insulted and humiliated for not being able to present kola-nuts to visitors. The presence of kola-nut communion manifests joy, unity, reconciliation, love, peace and solidarity. Here in the U.S. and elsewhere we can celebrate with kola-nuts where we have come from, who we are, and what we and all our children can become.

Like other rationalizations in our traditional setting, it is claimed that our ancestors went to the orchard of the gods and were asked to pluck any fruits they liked, they chose the kola-nut as the king fruit of all fruits. This merely underscores the place of kola-nut custom in Igbo society.

### **Battle for Survival**

We now turn to the battle for survival among the Igbo. I believe that the Igbo world-view and value system are critical in understanding the Igbo approach to survival even in very trying circumstances. Over two hundred years ago, the Igbo ex-slave, Olaudah Equiano writing about his kinsmen and women, declared in his celebrated autobiography, published in 1789, that

Everyone contributes something to the common stock and as we are unacquainted with idleness, we have no beggars. The benefits of such a mode of living is obvious. The West Indian planters prefer the slaves of Benin or Eboe (Igbo) to those of any other part of Guinea (Black Africa) for their hardiness, intelligence, integrity and zeal [Paul Edwards (ed), pp 7-8]

Comparing the Hausa and Igbo culture groups, LeVine has remarked:

The Hausa status symbol was politically oriented, whereas the Ibo was occupationally oriented. Among the Hausa, political office led to wealth and to political power. Thus a status mobility was achieved... through the demonstration of economic skills of an entrepreneurial sort. The ideal successful Ibo... appears to have been energetic and industrious farmer or trader (fisherman or craftsman) who aggrandized himself personally through productive or distributive activity (LeVine, pp 36-7).

The two statements above, one by an Igbo who was taken across the Atlantic in 1740 when he was about 9 to 10 years and never returned to Igboland, and the other by an independent foreign observer, are eloquent of Igbo character and outlook. The Igbo

are proud and committed to earning a living and helping their less fortunate relations and neighbours through hardwork. It is repugnant to the self-dignity of a healthy Igbo person to rely on others for livelihood. Such a lazy person is treated with scorn and contempt by his age-grade members and community. Igbo sense of hardwork and determination to survive even in difficult situations is certainly not a recent phenomenon.

Igbo continuous striving for survival appears to derive partly from environmental factors. We have earlier alluded to the migration of the Igbo from the heartland to other parts of Igboland. Because of the protracted use of the limited land by a dense population and the deterioration of the land resources upon which the people depended, naturally, the Igbo survival instinct manifested itself in leaving Igboland to other parts of modern Nigeria and beyond. The eminent scholar and university administrator, Prof. K.O. Dike, has referred to this when he opined that

Perhaps the most important factor conditioning Ibo history in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and in our time is land hunger... Hence the Ibos pressing against limited land resources had, of necessity, to seek other avenues of livelihood outside the tribal boundaries (Dike p. 28)

Over a century ago, the Rev. G.T. Basden, an Anglican missionary who arrived Onitsha in 1900 had attested to the high density of Igbo population. He asserted that “in the Ibo country there is a density to the square mile probably in excess of any other part of Africa save Egypt and the large cities” (Niger Ibos, 1960 p 80). The population is still one of the densest in Africa.

The Igbo are found in the remotest parts of the North, Southwest and South-South of Nigeria engaged in all sorts of occupation to be able to fend for themselves and their families. They have demonstrated a remarkable degree of resilience and success as rubber tappers, tillers of the soil, fishermen, drivers and astute traders and have incurred, in the process, the envy and jealousy of their hitherto friendly hosts. In the big cities, they are clustered together in slums and stranger-quarters (Sabon gari). They have been targets of vicious and unwarranted attacks as often witnessed in the North. When in 1953 there was a disagreement between the northern and southern politicians over British political disengagement from Nigeria, the Igbo bore the wrath of the anger and disapproval of the North. The event derived from Chief Anthony

Enahoro's motion for a 1956 date for self-government for Nigeria, which was bitterly opposed by the North Chief Awolowo undertook an ill-advised tour of the North and there were disturbances, especially in Kano where Igbo lives and property were wantonly destroyed. The political divide which was essentially fomented and nurtured by the British administration was superficially patched up while there was Pax Britannica. After independence in October 1960, one event after another, not really situated in Igboland, led to a civil war known for its brutality and scant regard for human life. The story of the pogrom in the North is so familiar that we don't need a rehash here.

At the end of the war, we were promised Reconciliation, Reconstruction and Rehabilitation. There was the running sore of abandoned property even in our own country. Nearly forty years after the war, the scars of the war are evident in Igboland; federal government presence is hardly noticeable anywhere in the culture-area. But the Igbo have continued their quest for survival, trying to rebuild their homes. They have gone to all nooks and crannies where they can eke out a living. Outside Igboland, their market stalls, houses and churches have been destroyed with endless excuses and subterfuges. The Igbo are not daunted, thanks to the elastic extended family system, thrift associations, town and village unions. The British Imperial historian, Dame Margery Perham, in a rather cynical reading of Igbo situation nearly 50 years ago averred that the Igbo "having no great history, no impressive chiefs and cities, they need to find their pride, their fulfilment, in Nigeria itself (M. Perham: 1960 pp 665-667).

The desire for self-improvement and actualization prompted the foremost Igbo leaders, namely, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, Dr. K.O. Mbadiwe, Dr. Nwafor Orizu, Mazi Mbonu Ojike, among others, to find their way into the U.S. In spite of the orchestrated campaign against American education, these pathfinders discovered and stressed the unlimited opportunities for those prepared to work hard here in the U.S. It is not surprising that the Igbo are the largest single ethnic group of black Africans, apart from our African-American brothers and sisters. The U.S. will continue to attract our people who are prepared to make the best of the opportunities. Our hope and prayer are that those Igbo men and women who are here will carry themselves with dignity

and honour and will continue to be a source of pride to Igboland and Africa for their numerous attainments.

### **Conclusion**

In trying to sketch the history of the Igbo before the European invasion of Igboland, we cannot employ purely Western models of historical investigation. Nor does one have to bother oneself with the exploits of kings and emperors. What is important to the historians, is how the Igbo have lived their lives over the centuries. From a multi-disciplinary approach – archaeological discoveries, linguistic evidence, etc – we find that the Igbo have lived in their present environment for several millennia. They practiced gainful agriculture to sustain their apparently dense population and engaged in trade, crafts and industries. The Igbo have not been inward looking or stagnant. They related with non-Igbo speaking neighbours through the exchange of goods and ideas, and inter-group marriages. The Niger and the Cross River were particularly important as arteries of communication and intercourse. The coming of the European widened the Igbo horizon and increased the people's volume of trade and agricultural output. But it brought with it some economic and socio-cultural disorientation which the Igbo are yet to recover from.

The Igbo believe in social mobility and an achieved status, not an ascribed one. In a limited land space and in diminishing land resources, they have had to struggle for a living outside their environment, even in a hard way, in order to earn a good living. They have suffered discrimination and an untold injustice in their country, but they refused to lose hope in themselves and in their country.

Thank you for your patience and for the opportunity to share ideas with you.

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