Political Organization in Nigeria Since the Late Stone Age

A History of the Igbo People

John N. Oriji

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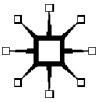

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It would have been impossible for me to write a book of this nature, which seeks to define Igbo history since the prehistoric period, without relying on the existing works of historians, anthropologists, archeologists, and many other specialists. Their contributions have been acknowledged in the endnotes and the bibliography. The book is somewhat shorter than my original manuscript, and even though some of the sources I consulted are not included here, it contains the major thrusts of my arguments. The condensed version needs to be seen as a necessary compromise I had to make to publish this work, which hopefully would help in advancing the frontiers of knowledge in African history during the twenty-first century, when rapid technological and social changes are attempting to erode the historical and cultural identities of humankind. As a pioneer work, the book is meant to be controversial, and I will be satisfied if it achieves this goal and opens up new areas of scholarship in African historiography.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Although the Igbo constitute one of the three largest ethnic nationalities of Nigeria, little is known about their political history prior to the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. The existing works deal primarily with the modern period, for which documents exist. Many of them, especially those authored by synchronists, are limited in historical depth. Hence, they create the misleading impression that the Igbo have lived in a stateless and static society throughout their history. Many Igbo people, including the educated elite, have uncritically accepted the views of the synchronic school in spite of their obvious limitations. The views have also gained greater credence due to the rapid pace of changes in Igbo society in modern times, leading to the erosion of its ancient politico-religious institutions and cosmologies. These facts have contributed to shaping the ideas and values of a new generation of Igbo people, who believe that the "Igbo world" was void in the past, lacking sacred authority holders and traditional institutions of governance. Their distorted perceptions of the Igbo world, disregard for experience, and mindless quest for power and wealth have contributed to the leadership crises the Igbo are facing in modern Nigerian politics.

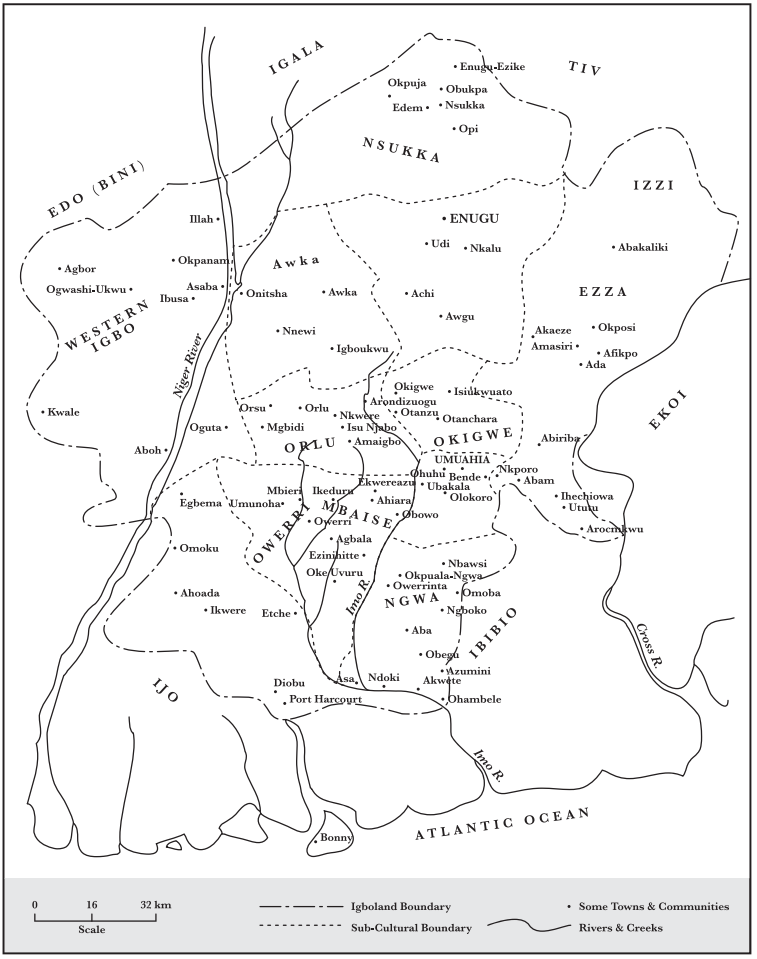
In spite of the mind-sets of many people, memories of the rich Igbo cultural heritage continue to linger in the minds of the few surviving elders versed in the Igbo past. When the elders are gone, we may lose their knowledge of the human experience as well as the abundance of wisdom—spanning many millennia—they have accumulated. The preservation of Igbo history for posterity is certainly one of the most significant challenges Igbo specialists and other Africanist scholars are facing at the present time. This book is then a pioneer effort that hopes to reinforce the quest for new perspectives in Igbo historiography. It seeks to understand the changes Igbo history and political systems have undergone since the prehistoric period.

The book is not only important to the Igbo and their neighbors, but also to researchers, who might find its methodology fruitful in studying the so-called stateless societies and thereby enrich our knowledge of African history.

The book is organized chronologically around interconnected themes that address major issues related to Igbo history and African historiography. Chapter 1 examines the geographical background of the Igbo, their economy and culture, and moves on to discuss the various methodologies adopted in studying their history and political systems. Chapter 2 analyzes the types of political systems the Igbo developed as they shifted from foraging to agriculture. Particular attention is paid to the techno-cultural complexity Igbo mini states (villages and village-groups) acquired during the African Iron Age, culminating in the emergence of the Igbo-Ukwu mega state (ninth-tenth centuries A.D.). Chapter 3 embarks on a comparative study of the history and political systems of Igbo-Ukwu and Igbo mini states on the one hand, and other states of the forest region of Nigeria on the other, to explain their similarities and areas of divergence before the genesis of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. Chapter 4 analyzes the dynamics of Igbo history and political systems during the slave trade and the emergence of militaristic mega states in the Yoruba-Edo (Bini) and Igala areas (fifteenth-eighteenth centuries). It also compares Igbo history and political systems with those of their neighbors, especially the Efik-Ibibio and the Eastern Ijo city-states. Chapter 5 discusses the rise of the Aro trade network and the diverse ways it affected Igbo history and political systems between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In addition, the chapter examines how the Aro trade network contributed to the emergence of kings and kingmakers of Igbo ancestry in some of the eastern delta states. Chapter 6 deals with the changes Igbo history and political systems underwent during legitimate commerce (nineteenth century), while Chapter 7 examines similar themes from the Aro Expedition (1901–1902) to the 1980s. Chapter 8 concludes the book, using the Igbo example to contribute to the debate on the theories of state formation and the classification of African political systems.

Geographical Setting, Economy, and Society

The homeland of the Igbo, who number over 35 million, lies in southeastern Nigeria. It is located between latitude 5–7 degrees north and longitude 6–8 degrees east, and occupies a total landmass of about 15,800 square miles.[1] The area is part of the larger tropical rain forest region of southern Nigeria, extending about 200 kilometers from the coastal region to Idah in the north (map 1.1).[2] In the past it was one of the richest and most diverse habitats



Igboland Showing some Sub-cultural Groups, Towns, and Communities

Map 1.1 Igboland drawn by the Graphic Communications Institute, Cal Poly State University

in human history. There were a variety of indigenous species of wild and domesticated yams (ji), cocoyams (ede), and three-leaved yams (onu). Its fauna included cows (ehi Igbo), goats (eghu Igbo), chickens (okuko), elephants (enyi), leopards (agu), and monkeys (enwe). There were also various

species of fish (azu), reptiles, and insects. Birds ranged from eagles (ugo) to kites (egbe) and parrots (iche), while indigenous trees, which later became major cash crops, included the oil palm tree (Elaeis guineesis), raphia palm (Raphia vinifera), and hardwoods such as iroko (oji) and mahogany, used either in building houses or as sources of firewood. Also important were the different species of plants, vegetables, and fruits that either served as dietary supplements or were used by native doctors (Dibia) in preparing herbs for preventing and curing diseases. The major minerals included the iron ores of the Nsukka-Udi-Awgu escarpment and the salt mines of Uburu and Okposi.

The location of the Igbo in the rain forest zone affects the rhythms of their economic and social activities during their two distinct seasons: the rainy season (April-October) and the dry season (November-April). During the rainy season, ushered in by the maritime southwest winds, the Igbo are engaged in tending their yams and other root crops and in weeding their farms. They celebrate the new yam festival honoring their ancestors (Ndiche/Ndichei) and the god of yams (Njoku, Ahajioku) during the first harvesting of some species of their yams (ikeji), between July and August. A more elaborate thanksgiving ceremony of the earth-goddess (Ala/Ana, the goddess of land, fertility, and agriculture) takes place after the final harvesting of yams (igwu ji), between September and October. The ceremony, in the past, involved an entire community, and various age groups assembled in the cultural center of their villages with their dance troupes. The festival reached its peak when the audience welcomed to the arena, with resounding ovation, a masquerade representing the earth-goddess.[3]

The dry season is marked by a short spell of the dusty and windy weather, the harmattan (uguru), which helps in "clearing the bush" in December, reminding the Igbo that the farming season is about to begin. The bushes are cleared in January, and the grass is burnt not only to kill harmful insects but also to increase the fertility of the soil; the planting of crops commences when the rain sets in between February and March.

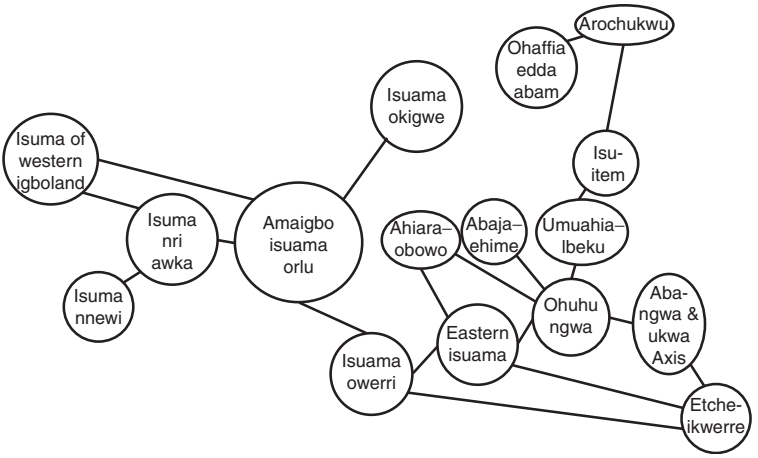
The tropical environment of Igboland has, however, changed over time due to its varying physical features, levels of rainfall, and human activity. For example, the northern section, which is more elevated (Enugu/Elugu) than the southern part, is susceptible to soil erosions, gullies, and landslides. In addition, although the average monthly rainfall of Igboland during the rainy season is about 70 inches, rainfall is heavier in the southern portion near the coast than in the north. Similarly, while the annual average temperature is about 80°F, it gets increasingly hotter northward, particularly during the dry season. These variations, as will be discussed, shaped the economy, settlement patterns, and cultural history of Igboland before the colonial period.

Cultural History: Igbo Origins

The study of Igbo origins has gained greater momentum since the Nigerian civil war (1967–1970), when the quest for Igbo identity began to occupy a more central space in academic discourse.[4] Some researchers have explored the etymology of the nomenclature "Igbo" to offer clues to their origins and common cultural identity. M.D. Jeffreys, for example, argues that "Igbo" means "forest dwellers" or the indigenous inhabitants of the forest region, whereas C. Ifemesia postulates that it is associated with the ancients (Ndi-gbo) who lived in the forest region.[5] In his own contribution, M. Onwuejeogwu maintains that the concept " Igbo" simply means "a community of people" who shared common values and ideas.[6]

But instead of attempting to define the concept "Igbo," other researchers have provided different perspectives on Igbo origins. A.E. Afigbo, for example, hypothesized that the pristine homeland of the Igbo was the Niger-Benue confluence area, where the kwa-speakers of the Niger-Congo phyla, associated with the Nok Complex (500 B.C.–200 A.D., the first iron-using culture of West Africa), expanded to the territories they presently occupy. Current archeological research, however, suggests that the early occupants of the Igbo area were foragers who had shifted to agriculture before the Nok Complex, using iron tools to cultivate yams and other staples (Chapter 2). V. Uchendu, E. Isichei, and others have turned their attention to Igboland, to differentiate between the primary core areas of its heartland, where the various groups lived before their migrations to the frontiers including the Nri-Awka zone, the Isuama Orlu, and the Owerri-Okigwe axes.[7]

Oral traditions, however, indicate that the Isuama trace their origins to a common mythical ancestor called "Igbo," who lived at Amaigbo (lit. the abode of Igbo) in Orlu area. A.E. Afigbo, an advocate of the Nri monolithic school of Igbo cultural roots, has recently affirmed the view that Amaigbo was a major center of ancient Igbo settlement and migrations.[8] The Amaigbo traditions are popular among many Igbo groups, including the Isuama-Owerri, the Eastern Isuama groups of Ahiara-Obowo, Ohuhu-Ngwa, and Ikwerre-Etche axis (sketch 1.1). In addition, traditions of the Eastern Isuama of Umuahia-Ibeku claim that their progenitor was one of the sons of "Igbo" who migrated from the Orlu axis. Hence, as C.J. Pleass noted, Ibeku is highly respected among communities in the Umuahia complex that trace their legendary origins to the town, including Umuokpara, Uzuakoli, Isu-Item, and those located in the Ohaffia-Abam-Arochukwu axis.[9] According to G.I. Jones, it was from the Ohaffia-Arochukwu ridge that an offshoot of the Eastern Isuama migrated to the eastern plains, forming the Northeastern Igbo.[10] The Isuama also constitute the autochthones of the Okigwe axis, and D. Forde,



Sketch 1.1 Isuama Migrations

G.I. Jones, P.A. Talbot, and H. Mulhall have classified the Nri-Awka as part of the larger Isuama Orlu group.[11] Nri traditions claim that Isu (Isuama) constitutes the senior ward of the Agbaja (Ana-Edo) clan in Nnewi area, while H. Henderson's study shows that the Isuama of Awka-Orlu uplands and other clans were already living in Onitsha before immigrants from the Benin Empire settled in the town during the fifteenth-sixteenth centuries.[12] Although the Isuama migrations in western Igboland have not been studied in detail, extant traditions of Ahaba (anglicized as Asaba) and Ibusa (Igbouzo) suggest that their progenitors were from the Isuama-Nri-Orlu area.[13]

Broad comparative studies of the various traditions indicate that the Isuama, who are the largest autochthonous settlers of Igboland, shared a common culture. According to traditions, the sacred authority holders and elders of some Isuama groups used to assemble annually at Amaigbo to worship their common earth-goddess (Ala Amaigbo) and renew their common cultural and religious ties. It is noteworthy that during the meetings of the now defunct Igbo State Union, elders from the Amaigbo-Orlu axis were given the privilege of blessing kolanuts before they were shared amongst the attendees.[14] Admittedly, modern education and means of transportation and communication have helped in arousing a greater sense of common consciousness and identity among the Igbo. But there is little doubt that before colonialism, some Isuama and other groups associated themselves with their common Igbo name. Attesting to this fact, W. Baikie, who visited

parts of Igboland in 1854, noted that "the name Ibo or Igbo is familiarly employed amongst the natives as London among us."[15] Similarly, Olaudah Equiano, whose work was published in 1789, constantly called his people "Eboe" (Igbo), and there is no evidence that he learned their name from outsiders.[16]

The Isuama traditions, however, do not provide a clue to the origins of all Igbo people because the area they occupy at the present time has witnessed waves of population movements since ancient times. It is likely, for example, that the massive population movements stemming from the desiccation of the Sahara (2500 B.C.–2300 B.C.) led to the infiltration of some displaced peoples into Igboland and other parts of the forest region. More recent movements comprising a larger number of people, recorded in oral accounts, include those who fled and took refuge in Igboland during the expansion of the Yoruba, Benin, and Igala kingdoms between the thirteenth and eighteenth centuries and during the Fulani Jihad in northern Nigeria (1804–1841).[17]

Archeological and linguistic studies show that humans had occupied Igboland before the Bantu began to migrate from there and other parts of southeastern Nigeria to occupy and populate most of sub-Saharan Africa between 500 B.C. and 200 A.D.[18] It is also significant that the Igbo had attained an outstanding degree of cultural complexity between 500 B.C. and 1000 A.D. Hence, they are classified by archeologists as among the "Pioneer Iron Age cultivators of West Africa."[19]

The antiquity of Igbo culture brings into the limelight the tradition associating its origins with the Hebrews/Jews or "the lost tribe of Israel." The tradition has continued to gain popularity in modern times among publicists, romanticists, nonprofessional historians, and others who are generally concerned about the marginalization of the Igbo in Nigerian politics.[20] Many of them have equated the Igbo experience with the sad chapters of Jewish history. Some go to great lengths to buttress their views by citing the Hebrewisms in Igbo culture found in the works of O. Equiano and J. Horton, and colonial officers and missionaries. It is, however, apparent that humans had settled in Igboland before the exodus of the Jews from Egypt around 2000 B.C. The Hebrewisms in Igbo culture, then, need further scholarly inquiry to determine their origins. They might have been independent developments, coincidental, or a result of diffusion, since the Igbo-Ukwu excavations suggest that the Igbo were probably linked by international trade with the Arab-Indian world between the ninth and tenth centuries A.D.

As already noted, the autochthonous settlers of Igboland lived initially in their primary core areas, and as their population increased, they migrated in varying waves and at different historical periods to settle in other ecological zones.[21] But the early inhabitants of the Igbo area did not live in isolation.

They received for many millennia new neighbors from other parts of Nigeria, who settled among them and contributed to the complexity and diversity of their culture.

Diversity of Igbo Culture: The Igbo and Their Neighbors

In addition to immigrants, the diversity of Igbo culture has been dictated by the location and ecology of the various Igbo groups. For example, some traits of Benin political structure are found among the Western Igbo and some Niger Igbo communities, although they also retained the basic elements of their indigenous political systems. Igala political influences are noticeable in the Nsukka area, while Nri ritual specialists helped in spreading the Ozo title society and "Ikenga" (the cult of the right hand and of success) to parts of northern Igboland. Similarly, the Aro and their trading partners propagated in many parts of southern Igboland, Efik-Ibibio politico-commercial institutions like the Ekpe/Okonko title association. Some Southern Igbo communities that traded with coastal middlemen were influenced by the culture of Bonny and other Ijo city-states.

As A. Afigbo has aptly noted, the encounter between the Igbo and their neighbors was not a one-way traffic. It was characterized by mutual exchanges of people, goods, services, and ideas.[22] Igbo influences were noticeable in Bonny, Kalabari, and other city-states even before the genesis of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, and some of their leading kings and chiefs bore Igbo names and married Igbo women. It is also noteworthy that borderland Igbo people living near the Ibibio, whom they call "Nmogho," are bilingual due to intermarriages, long-standing commercial contacts, and periodic skirmishes over territorial boundaries. For similar reasons, the borderland Ibibio also speak the Igbo language. The influence of the Aro oracle (Ibini Ukpabi) spread northwards to the Igala and Idoma areas, westwards to the Isoko-Urhobo, and southwards to the coastal Ijo communities. The Kamanu oracle was consulted by the Kalabari and other coastal city-states, and its offshoot, the Igwekala oracle of Umunoha, had a similar impact among the Southern Igbo and their neighbors. The Agbala of Awka of northern Igboland was popularized by its itinerant diviners, who, at times, traveled outside the Igbo area. The Onoja Oboni oracle of Ogurugu in the Nsukka axis played a key role in the installation of the Attah/King of the Igala. Igbo influence in the kingdom is further evidenced by the fact that Omeppa, said to be of Igbo ancestry, was appointed the prime minister (Achadu) of the Igala, and head of their kingmakers (the Igala Mela).[23] It is also noteworthy that the borderland Nsukka-Igala communities are bilingual, having intermingled with each other for many millennia.

Classifications of Igbo Culture and Politico-Social Organizations

The complexity of Igbo culture has posed a major puzzle in classifying it either as a single culture (advocated by the melting pot theorists) or as subcultural groups (espoused by the salad bowl theorists). This puzzle is difficult to resolve. Although Igbo language is often used as a common cultural identity of its speakers, V. Uchendu has noted that Igbo language is characterized by different dialects that are mutually unintelligible between the polar communities due to the linguistic influence of their non-Igbo neighbors and "greater marginal isolation."[24] For this reason, an Nsukka native may find it difficult to understand the dialect of the Ikwerre. During the Igbo Women's War of 1929, for example, a District Officer who had mastered the Onitsha dialect was unable to comprehend the dialect of communities in Bende Division when he was posted to that area.[25]

There are then many classifications of Igbo culture, each adopting different variables in distinguishing between the various cultural subgroups. The work of D. Forde and G.I. Jones, who pioneered the classifications in 1950, is important, especially in light of the insights they provide into the diverse cultures, economies, and politico-religious organizations of the five subgroups that featured in their typology. The first, the Northern Igbo/Onitsha Igbo, comprises Nri-Awka, Elugu/ Enugu, and Onitsha town. The Nri are reputed as ritual specialists who developed a mega state headed by hereditary sacred rulers, while the Awka are blacksmiths and traders and former agents of the Agbala oracle. The Ozo and Mmo (representing ancestral spirits) were involved in governance among both groups. The Elugu, consisting of communities that occupy the Nsukka-Awgu-Udi escarpment, are versed in blacksmithing, although they are primarily farmers. Their sociopolitical organization is headed by the Onyishi (priests of fertility), but the Ama title holders and Odo and Omoba ancestral spirits play important roles in the administration of their communities. As for Onitsha town, located near the banks of the Niger River, it developed a highly stratified society headed by a king (Obi), who ruled with his council of elders and Ofo holders (Ndiche Ume), and members of the Ozo, and Muo title societies.[26]

The Southern Igbo, consisting of the Isuama, Oratta-Ikwerre, Ohuhu-Ngwa, and Isu Item, are the second subgroup. They are primarily farmers, and the Ezeji (chief/king of yams) title is said to have originated among them. The priests of the earth-goddess (Ezeala) served as their dominant authority holders in the past. Also involved in the administration of the communities were the council of elders (Amala) and the Okonko society. The Isuama-Orlu, who live in a densely populated area, have taken to trade,

pottery, and other crafts, while the Oratta of Owerri, who continue to be farmers, are reputed for their Mbari houses featuring clay sculptures of the earth-goddess and other deities, animals, and contemporary events.[27] Two famous oracles are located in the area: the Kamanu oracle of Ozuzu in the Ikwerre-Etche axis, and its offshoot, the Igwe-ka-Ala oracle of Umunoha near Owerri. As for the Ohuhu-Ngwa, they are associated with one of the largest population movements in Igbo history, leading to the settlement of the Ohuhu in Ezinihitte (Mbaise), Obowo, Mbano, and parts of southern Umuahia (Ohuhu, Ibeku, and other places). The central section of Umuahia is occupied by the Isu-Item, consisting of Alayi, Item, and Ozuitem, and among them, the Otusi (priest of fertility), Amala (village council), the Ekpe society, and age-grades served as major organs of government. The Ngwa settled in most of what was later called Aba province; some migrated further southward and infiltrated into many places, including the Ikwerre-Etche axis, founding towns like Diobu (Ndi Obia, called town of strangers/immigrants by the Ikwerre) and Bonny. The Ngwa and the Ukwa (Asa and Ndoki) were among the Igbo communities that engaged in relay/regional trade with Bonny and other coastal towns before the emergence of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade.[28]

The Eastern/Cross River Igbo, the third subgroup, include the Ada (Edda), Abam, Ohaffia, and Aro and live in the fertile plains of the Cross River. They are, therefore, primarily farmers, although the Abiriba were noted for blacksmithing, while the Aro used their oracle (Chukwu) and local warriors generically called "Abam" and the Ekpe/Okonko society to dominate the slave trade and emerge as leading itinerant traders of Igboland. The Aro are patrilineal and they established a mega state headed by their priestly chief of fertility (Eze Aro), whereas the other groups are matrilineal, and their political system was based on the age-grade system.[29]

The fourth subgroup, the Northeastern Igbo of Afikpo-Abakaliki axis, consists of Afikpo town, Amaseri, Okpoha, Unwana, Akaeze, and Nkporo as well as the three Abakaliki communities of Ezza, Ikwo, and Izzi. S. Ottenberg examined the social organization and the double descent system of the Afikpo, which parallels those of their Cross River neighbors, while he and Jones discussed how the Ezza, Ikwo, and Izzi subdivided into smaller groups while expanding from their homeland to the Cross River and the southern Idoma area to occupy a total landmass of about 2,000 square miles.[30] The Northeastern Igbo live in a fertile area of low population density, and they were and still are among the major yam cultivators of Igboland. They are called "Ogu Uku" due to the large and circular blades they use in farming. Their political organization was centered on the head of the fertility cult (Isi Ala), but the "horse title" is more widespread among them than the Ekpe/Okonko society.[31]

The fifth subgroup, the Western Igbo, is subdivided into the Northern Ika, Southern Ika (Kwale), and the Riverain (Oru).They are primarily farmers and fishermen, although Aboh and the towns on the Niger were actively engaged in trade. Northern Ika communities bordering the Edo, such as Agbor, have been influenced by the Benin title system, and authority is vested in their leading chiefs (Obi, Diokpa) and the council of elders (Onuto, Olinze). As for the Southern Ika, political authority among them is exercised by the head of the senior lineage (Okpara Ukwu), the senior age-set (Ndi Okwa), and ancestral masked spirits (Ekeleke). The Riverain Igbo comprise heterogeneous communities like Ahoada, Ogba, and Egbema. The communities were administered by their traditional authority holders (Eze) and council of elders (Amala) and others, but those located on the Niger and its tributaries (such as the mega states of Aboh and Oguta) shared some traits of the Benin political system.[32] The water goddess (mammy wata) associated with fertility, and prosperity in trade, is a major religious institution of the Niger Igbo and other Riverain peoples of Nigeria.[33]

Controversy Stemming from the Classifications of Igbo Political Systems

Although the classifications of Forde and Jones continue to serve as a model for understanding the diversity of Igbo culture and political systems, they have aroused some controversy. A. Afigbo and M. Onwuejeogwu, for example, have used the classifications to arrive at different typologies based, respectively, on ecological zones and civilizations.[34] The most recent debates over the classifications have been generated by V. Uchendu's typology, which is based on the kinship principle: "the Ikwu Kinship Belt" and "the Umunna Kinship Belt."[35] Uchendu then used the two belts to arrive at three broad types of political organizations/systems that existed in Igboland:

Type I. Double Descent Corporate Groups "Ikwu Kinship Belt": The Age-set System

The double descent groups, or the "Ikwu Kinship Belt," are located in eastern/Cross River Igboland and comprise the Ada, Abam, and Ohaffia. Others include those studied by S. Ottenberg, such as the Akaeze, Amasiri, Okpoha, and Afikpo. Their kinship system enables an individual to inherit property from both the patrilineal and matrilineal descent groups. Political authority is exercised by a hierarchy of age-grades, although the Ada and Abam lack the ancestral Ofo symbol of authority found in most Igbo communities.[36]

Type II. The Patrilineal Corporate Descent Groups "Umunna Kinship Belt": The Western Igbo and Niger Igbo

Unlike the Cross River Igbo, the Western Igbo and Niger Igbo are patrilineal, and therefore, belong to the Umunna Kinship Belt and also have different political systems. The political organization of the Western Igbo, for example, was headed by the Okpara Ukwu/Diokpa, while the Niger Igbo had a hereditary kingship system that incorporated autochthones, immigrants, titled men, and others in their elaborate political structure. It is, however, noteworthy that I. Nzimiro and K. Okonjo's case studies show that in addition to the Obi (king), and others involved in governance, the leader and spokesperson of women known as the Omu or the Queen Mother, and Umuada (married, unmarried, and divorced daughters of a community) played significant roles in the political and social affairs of their communities.[37]

Type III. The Patrilineal Corporate Descent Groups "Umunna Kinship Belt" of Northwestern, Northeastern, Central, and Southern Igboland

The other communities that belong to Type III, containing over 80 percent of the total Igbo population, constitute the major zone of the "Umunna Kinship Belt." Their political organizations are mixed, ranging from the mega states of Nri and the Ozo titled society of northern Igboland to the mini states of southern Igboland where sacred authority holders (Ezela, priest of the earth-goddess), the council of elders (Amala), and Okonko featured in their political administration. The "Umunna Kinship Belt" will be the primary focus of this study, although data from the other belts will be used for comparative purposes.[38]

Critique of Typologies

Bearing in mind that Igbo communities have experienced varying degrees of immigration in their history, the problem with the kinship belt taxonomy is obvious. A typical Igbo village, for example, comprised its original founders, who formed the senior lineage or ward, while those of later settlers were ranked in the order in which their ancestors had immigrated and settled in the locality. The "kinship belt" approach, then, ignores the ranking of lineages and the cultural complexity Igbo villages had attained before colonialism. In addition, since there was hardly an Igbo village whose entire population could biologically trace its ancestry to a common founder, kinship in the Igbo lexicon was and is still a flexible concept used as an idiom of political organization to incorporate different lineage groups into a common

political territorial community such as the village or village-groups (mini states). Thus, when immigrants arrived in a village, the Ofo Ala (the community ofo of the senior ward) was used to ritually integrate them into the mini state, and thereafter, all members of the polity began to see themselves as "Umunna," an exogamous group of "kinsmen." But in places where the immigrants were not ritually integrated into the village, its members have continued to practice intermarriage till the present time. Similarly, among the Riverain and other communities that had a large number of slaves, people in the same compound or ward, who fictively call themselves "kinsmen and women," intermarried with one another.

More importantly, although typologies are a valuable analytic tool in the natural and social sciences in that they provide simple and comparative frameworks for understanding the human condition, their limitations are noteworthy. Typologies are conceptual maps reflecting the "mental images" and theoretical paradigms of researchers, and consequently, they do not fully capture the complexities and configurations of the human experience.[39] In addition, typologies deal with the ethnographic present, or a synchronic analysis of a static human condition. Hence, they fail to account for the economic, technological, demographic, and other factors that have contributed to the dynamics of Igbo political systems since prehistory. To fully understand the problems created by the various typologies, let us examine in greater detail the sources and methodology of the synchronic school of thought that has dominated Igbo historiography for over 80 years, before discussing the diachronic approach that has informed this study.

Sources and Methodology: The Synchronic Approach and its Critics

Intense study of Igbo political systems began after the Igbo Women's War of 1929. The Women's War shook and astonished the colonial administration and compelled it to appoint a Commission of Inquiry to investigate the causes of "the disturbances." District Officers were also instructed to compile intelligence reports dealing with the roots of the Women's War and the sociopolitical organization of communities under their jurisdiction, while anthropologists like M. Green and M. Perham were commissioned to embark on case studies of Igbo women and other aspects of the culture of specific Igbo communities.[40]

Although the various works have helped in enriching Igbo historiography, they were primarily meant to provide useful information that would enable the colonial administration to fashion a better policy of indirect rule in southeastern Nigeria. Hence, much emphasis was placed on the study of

modern Igbo political institutions to establish some extrapolations on their past history. Some District Officers, however, found it difficult to combine the writing of the reports with their daily administrative duties, especially due to the deadline given to them. Their reports are therefore wanting in scope and scholarship. Also important is the ethnocentric bias of the colonial writers, which M. Chamberlain has noted in her critique of the historiography of the era.[41] The colonial writers presumed that the Igbo lived in a stateless society since they did not have mega states like the British Empire or similar political systems found in parts of northern and western Nigeria.

R. Stevenson was one of the most outstanding critics of the application of the synchronic approach in studying Igbo political systems. On the basis of his comparative data derived from different parts of Africa, Stevenson maintained that traditional Igbo political systems had undergone rapid changes in the past, creating a cleavage in modern times between de jure (sacred authority holders) and de facto (modern chiefs) rulers of Igboland. As he put it:

> 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.[42]

Stevenson's provocative analysis elicited some positive responses from certain researchers, who called for a reevaluation of the existing synchronic analysis of the traditional Igbo political system. S. Ottenberg, for example, noted that

> Stevenson's work, in addition to my own researchers into the pre-European period at Afikpo . . . and the ability of the Igbo, demonstrated in the recent Nigerian crisis (1967–1970), if not in the earlier nationalist movement and the regional government, to develop considerable centralization of authority, raises the question of whether there has not been more direct authority in the traditional sphere than previously realized.[43]

G.I. Jones, a doyen of Igbo historical anthropology, offered another enlightening criticism of the synchronic approach and its underlying assumptions. In reviewing a major work edited by M. Fortes and E. Evans-Pritchard, entitled *African Political Systems,* Jones faulted the book's typology, which divided African societies into two extreme categories—mega states (empires/kingdoms) and stateless systems of foragers and semisedentary

peoples—leaving out the middle-level political systems or the mini states found in the Igbo area and other places. He then concluded:

> An Igbo village [village-group] possesses the requirements of a state in that it has some centralized administrative and judicial institutions, and cleavages of wealth and status corresponding to the distribution of power and status.[44]

Similarly, Susan McIntosh has examined what she described as "the static and ahistorical classificatory muddles" created by the existing works in African ethnography. In a seminal work edited by her, *Beyond Chiefdoms: Pathways to Complexity,* she noted that the existing works not only equate "complexity with the emergence of [kingship],"[45] but ignore the structural complexity attained by the political systems of the Igbo and other African societies that belong to the intermediate- level/middle-range category of social formation.

In his own contributions on traditional Igbo political system, P. Coutsoukis began with a witty poser in his write-up in *The Library of Congress Country Studies,* entitled "The Igbo: A Stateless Society?" He then went on to respond to his poser, disputing the view that the Igbo were a stateless people, especially in light of the Igbo-Ukwu archeological discoveries.[46]

Although the synchronic approach has attracted a barrage of criticisms, its controversial views have been perpetuated in recent times by three schools of thought with divergent orientations and perspectives of history. The first school is exemplified by R. Horton and D. Northrup, whose works were published in the 1970s.[47] They were fascinated by the "unique case" of the Igbo in African history, idealizing their stateless and highly egalitarian society in which the individual assumed exclusive responsibility for his/her security, economic well-being, and psychic comfort. Unlike Northrup, Horton discussed his methodology in detail, and a brief review of his views is informative. He applied the "conflict and equilibrium model" in his study and came to the conclusion that when conflicts arose in an Igbo community, lineages simply allied against one another until equilibrium was restored, since the Igbo lacked a central organ of law arbitration.[48] Jan Vansina's criticism of the "conflict and equilibrium model" used in studying the so-called "segmentary societies" is relevant to the Igbo case. The model, as evidenced by Horton's analysis, is deterministic in that it assumes that the Igbo had no history, and hence, they lived in a segmentary society that was "congruent with kinship, not with kingship, in sharp contrast to [their neighbors]."[49]

In addition, Horton's mechanical analysis of conflict resolution among the Igbo ignores their ancient complex systems of jurisprudence. Thus, as will be discussed, there were acts of abominations associated with violations of the laws and taboos of gods and the ancestors that upset the ritual balance of the

entire community. When such violations occurred (aru, alu), the offender was held liable and responsible for the crime. The Igbo then had institutionalized mechanisms for resolving conflicts that transcended lineage alliances.

The second school of thought comprises scholars of Igbo ancestry, and their works can be divided into two categories. The first category of works was authored by nationalist historians who attempted to decolonize Nigerian history to justify the quest for self-government and independence. They maintained that the Igbo lived in a modern "republican" and "democratic society" similar to those found in the Western world. Some of the leading exponents of this school, like E.N. Njaka, went to great lengths in highlighting the normative and idealistic features of the traditional Igbo political system variously associated with "Ohacracy" and "Ofoism," which placed emphasis on individualism, achievement, egalitarianism, and the participation of all adult males in governance.[50]

The second category of scholars has given a different twist to the synchronic analysis. Their views are similar to those of the "literate elite" of the colonial era, who, in their unrelenting effort to usurp the functions of the traditional authority holders of Igboland, informed colonial officers that the Igbo had no chiefs/kings, "Igbo enwe Eze." Some of the modern scholars who see themselves as epitomizing every dimension of excellence in "an individualistic and stateless" Igbo society have helped in popularizing the slogan "Igbo enwe Eze" to justify the key positions they occupy not only in academia, but in the modern politico-bureaucratic structures of Nigeria. The concept "Eze" is as ancient as agrarian Igbo society, and in the traditional lexicon it is an honorific title of a king or chief of a community. Hence, the politico-religious heads of mega states (kingdoms) and mini states (chiefdoms) bear the same honorific title. The tendency of synchronists to assign the title exclusively to the autocratic heads of the mega states has contributed to their misleading analysis of the structure of traditional Igbo society. It is noteworthy that Chieka Ifemesia, after examining the traditional organization of Igbo societies from a historical perspective, concluded that the concept of Eze (King/Chief) is "so traditionally entrenched in Igbo culture [and] so deeply built into the Igbo language, that it [could not] have been of alien or more recent provenance."[51]

Age and repetition have, however, helped in lending credence to the views of the synchronic school of thought, which have been perpetuated for nearly eight decades in books; journals; and the popular media, including newspapers and televisions, giving them the aura of a religious doctrine that no one dares challenge. Thus, when the anthropologist A. Onwuejeogwu boldly questioned the claims of the physicist C. Onwumechili, who delivered the Ahajoku lecture of 2000, "Igbo Enwe Eze" (the Igbo have no kings/chiefs),

a split occurred among Igbo specialists and other members of the audience, leading to the formation of "The Front for the Defense of Igbo Heritage."[52] The schism produced fruitful results because A. Afigbo, who was by then the Chairman of the Ahajioku Lecture series, later offered a clearer analysis of the dynamics of Igbo political systems since colonialism, incorporating some of the views of the Onwuejeogwu school of thought. Afigbo, however, defended some of the postulations of Onwumechili, blaming the controversy his lecture aroused on his sojourn in the United States, which prevented him from realizing that "he was stepping into an academic and political minefield."[53] But Onwumechili's sojourn in the United States probably had little or nothing to do with the basic underpinnings of his lecture. The truth is that Onwumechili is neither a historian nor a social scientist familiar with the historiography of Igbo political systems. He therefore fell into the same trap as earlier synchronists by comparing the Igbo example with the mega states of northern and western Nigeria, ignoring the fact that traditional Igbo society belonged to the mini state category of social formation. In addition, Onwumechili used the eminence he has attained in the scientific community to justify his view that the Igbo had no chiefs in the past. He then argued that there are

> Some parallels between scientific culture and the legacies of *Igbo Enwe Eze.* Scientific culture recognizes no kings and chiefs with divine knowledge. The tests of demonstrability and conformability are applied to the views of all scientists. The ancestry, country of origin, and position in society do not confer any privilege on the discoveries and views of a scientist. The long-standing researchers and great achievers in a field of science may be respected and may be invited to write or review progress in the field but there is no servility to their views. Thus like the Igbos, science has no king.[54]

The comparison of Igbo society with the scientific community ignores some fundamental aspects of its cultural history. Traditional Igbo society was not static. Instead, it has undergone many remarkable changes over time that contributed to the transformation of its institutions, ideas, and values, leaving us with a "modern Igbo culture" that is different from the traditional one. In addition, as an Igbo proverb claims, "mpisiri aka ahaghi nna" (lit. all fingers are not equal). Hence, as will be discussed in this book, traditional Igbo society was highly stratified, including a hierarchy of lineage groups (onumara); hereditary office holders of a lineage group, the Okpara; and villages and village-groups, or mini states, the Ezeala/Ezeana (priests of the earth-goddess); Ogaranya (a wealthy person) and Ogbenye (a poor person); Okonko, Ozo, Ezeji, and Eze-ede titles based on achievement; varying statuses ranging from Amadi/Nwadiala or indigenes, who had full rights of citizenship, to Ohu or slaves, who had limited rights; the Osu, cult slaves with more circumscribed