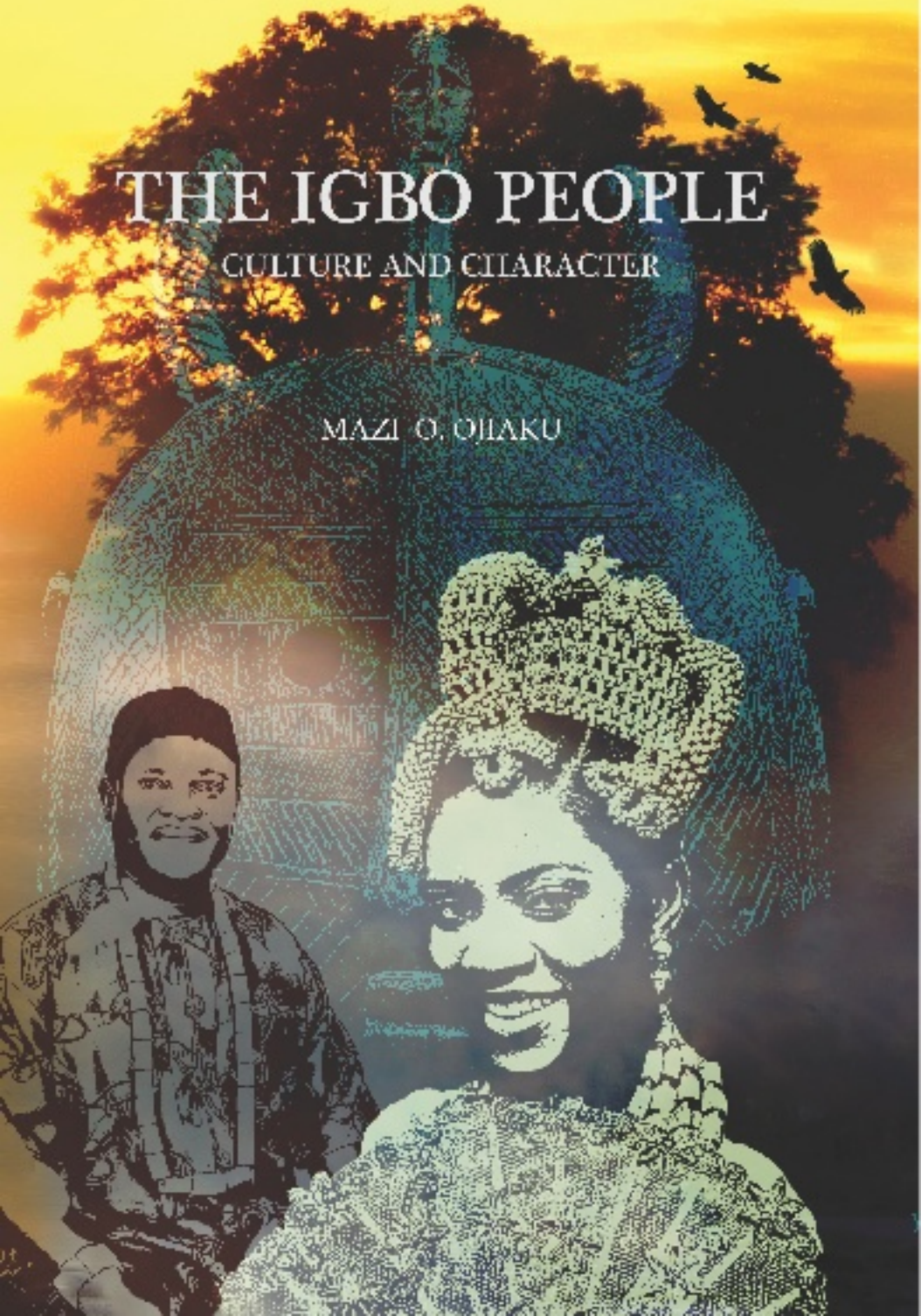
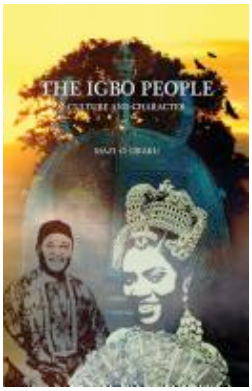
THE IGBO PEOPLE

CULTURE AND CHARACTER

MAZI O. OHAKU





Tracing the origin of the Igbo people back to the Bantu in antiquity, and exploring the etymology of the word Igbo, the author notes that, although the name is not native to the language, the people have always inhabited the same geo-physical environment, held similar worldview and shared, in all its diversity, the same culture. Out of this common ecology and cosmology emerged the Igbo Personality: the egalitarian democrat and collective individualist, Pan-Nigerian in outlook

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CHAPTER 2

BLACK MIGRATIONS IN PRE-HISTORIC TIMES

Tracing with unfailing accuracy the course of the migrations of the Blacks over thousands of years can be a difficult exercise. It would entail identifying the most significant aspects of the process: the various bands and their leaders; locations and names of settlements; sizes of population before a new band split-off; the length of the migrations in time and in space; difficulties encountered along the way; and what, if any, the connection is between and among groups in the same area. If the earliest of the pre-historic population movement was that of the Homo sapiens erectus some 60,000 years ago, the first major migration of peoples began in the Sahara in reaction to its desiccation between 2,500 and 2,300 B. C.

Subjected to desertification by the forces of a previous deforestation, and as a result of the slowly moving sand-storms of the north, a great portion of the remaining grassland in the region eventually disappeared. The effect was the 'birth' of the Sahara Desert and the dispersion of the Blacks in different directions: some to the remaining oases in the desert; others to Northern Africa; some to the Nile Valley; others southward to the savanna region; and still in bands and over trackless lands, others migrated to the forest region of West and Central Africa, as well as to the Southern areas.[1]

In these new and diverse environments and landscapes - grasslands, highlands, river floodplains, coastal estuaries and forests - the immigrants discovered edible plants and animal resources, and developed the techniques of manipulating the species for food, medicines and spiritual needs.[2] Thus around 4000 - 5000 years ago, particularly in the vegetation belt between the Sahara desert and the forest zone of diverse flora and fauna, Man began to domesticate plants and vegetables in response to the ecology of his environment.

With year-round warm temperature and a soil that sustained a multitude and variety of plant species and animal life, Man the hunter-gatherer, hardly felt the need to domesticate animals. Roots and tubers readily exploitable as food, and fruits, vegetables and seeds rich in protein for his diet, abounded in the region. Additional protein was readily obtained through fishing in the rivers and streams.

The invention of fire about 1,000,000 years, and the advent of sedentary life 35,500 years ago, respectively, as well as the subsequent production and accumulation of better tools, ensured increased food production that sustained a growing population and expanding migration. Migrants followed river lines and ocean coasts into the fringes of the Guinea forest and even into the forest itself. The growth in numbers led to settlement in large groups, regulation of community life, burying their dead with care, and solving other problems associated with comparatively large numbers of people.[3] Thus, before the large-scale desiccation that finally created the permanent barrier between north and sub-Sahara Africa about 8,000 years ago, Blacks were already familiar, not only with the domestication of plants and animals [4] but also with settled life.

BORN IN ISOLATION

Historians are of the view that the most massive group of people who migrated from Western to Central, Eastern and Southern Africa consequent on the desertification, were Bantu.[5] One of the migratory routes is believed to have run along the northern edge of the Congo Basin and across the Bornu Plains, before fanning out in different directions.[6] A group is believed to have moved eastwards along the Gongola River to the headwaters of Lake Chad where they settled as cultivators and later-day *Kanuri.* Another group moved westwards to the River Niger area to form the *Hausa* and the *Yoruba* peoples of later-day Nigeria.[7] In moving south along the valley of the River Benue, a third group entered the Niger–Benue confluence area from where around 5,000 to 6,000 years ago, it began to separate from its nearest Kwa-speaking groups.[8]

The Niger-Benue confluence area in the West African forest zone identified by biologists as 'a geographical area of potential isolation' is one contiguous territory, bounded in the north by the Benue Valley and trough; in the south by the Atlantic Ocean and the Niger Delta; in the east by the Adamawa Highlands and the Cameroon Mountains; and in the west by the floodplains of the Niger Valley. The area is so identified because it has been reasonably insulated from the scourges of a number of diseases associated with the tropics. In other words, for quirks of ecology, the area has long been a safe and friendly "island" for Man's early occupation. The mosquitoes in the area, for example, live mostly among the high trees and, as malaria vectors, are excluded from the habitat of ground-dwelling Man.[9]

This ecology is in contrast to the distant but similar forest areas of Sudan and Uganda in Eastern Africa or the grassland plains of neighboring Nasarawa State north of River Benue. For centuries, river blindness has devastated thousands of lives in the disease-ridden forest areas of Eastern Africa, [10] while the Nasarawa grassland plains experience endemic widespread outbreaks of elephantiasis. As a result of the peculiar ecology of the vectors in the 'geographical area of potential isolation', the inhabitants possibly suffered far less from the scourges of sleeping sickness, river blindness or elephantiasis, than expected. What is more, in prehistory, the ecology may have saved Man in the area from the effects of affliction of those diseases.[11]

Besides, the area is blessed with abundant and diverse plant life: a variety of indigenous agricultural plant domesticates, rich in both protein and carbohydrates, for early Man's survival. Among these are: kola, yam, *ube*, castor-oil bean, oil bean tree, oil palm tree, and African breadnut (*ukwa*). Cultural use to which most of these plants have been put since antiquity does not seem to have varied much among the inhabitants of the area. It can be inferred that the latter's ancestors were among the earliest pioneers in the exploitation of the plants, for food.[12] Furthermore, favorable conditions enabled them to improve on the techniques of food production. Increase in food availability brought about changes in the group's way of life. Changes in life style in turn enabled them to develop or acquire more and better skills. By thus

making fruitful the relationship between Man and his environment, friendly Nature also enhanced Man's relations with his fellows.

Such forest food crops as the yam (*Dioscoria)* and coco-yam (*Colocasia*) from South East Asia early in the Christian era; cassava and maize as well as fruit plants – oranges, mangoes and bananas – from the New World during the Slave Trade, made much impact on the society. As sources of calories, they produced far more per acre than anything known before.[13] Food availability contributed to the growth in population and the evolution of thousands of communities.

It can be concluded that: i) the early settlers in the Chad-Benue-Congo triangle were part of the mainstream of the Negroid peoples who began around 6,000 years ago to differentiate into the varied ethnic and linguistic groupings of modern Africa; ii) one of the groups' offspring that dispersed within that triangle settled in an area in the forest zone of West Africa that for centuries saved its members from the scourge of certain tropical diseases; and iii) the development of agriculture and the later introduction of iron technology among them led to the production of more food and the rise of many communities. This seems to have been accelerated by the introduction of new plant species in the era of the transAtlantic trade. The rise of a multitude of communities aided the attainment of the highest level of social integration in the form of *the clan,* and in improvements in the peoples' life-style. Many of these communities in 'the geographical area of potential isolation', in particular, were predominantly one people, united by a common culture and language, albeit with noticeable dialectical differences. However, they had no national name. In time, as a major cultural nationality, they became known as the *Igbo*, and their home I*gboland.* How, when, and why this happened shall be discussed in Chapter 5.

HOW GROUPS GET THEIR NAMES: THE PRODUCTION OF OTHERNESS

It would seem that in the beginning no particular group claimed the name *Igbo* exclusively as its own. Neither is there any evidence that

the ancestors of the people known today by that term had a common name distinguishing them as a group, nor any name by which others identified them as one people. Nor was any group ever so identified, in that distant past. Each community or clan, it seems, bore its own name distinct from its neighbor's, cherished for its meaning or significance and upheld with the pride of local autonomy. How then did the noun, *Igbo*, come into existence?

Onomatology or the study of names, shows that names are usually given by others. In general, like many a gift, a name is given without prior knowledge, advice, or even consent of the receiver. Each name is, to an extent, an imposition, though with a difference: individuals usually receive their names at infancy from family members and invariably, with warmth. Only occasionally does one take or give the self a name. Groups commonly receive theirs through interaction with other groups, and rarely with affection.

On group names and for the purpose of discussion, the giver of a name will be referred to as *the self*; the party to whom the name is given, *the other*, and the act of giving such name, *the production of otherness*. In the exercise, because *the self* needs and breeds *otherness* so as to have value or even to exist, it perceives itself as *creator* and the norm, while conceiving *the other* as a different and inferior creature. Rather than highlight the similarities with *the other*, *the self* always highlights the differences between them. Hence it never creates *the other* in *its* own image. Furthermore, the process does not tolerate things in the singular but always strives to weave a broad, all-encompassing basket into which *the other* is dropped in large numbers and stereotyped.[14]

People are lumped together and given a name, either on the basis of their geographical location with its perceived characteristics, or their condition of life when they came into contact with those who named them. Although often rejected initially by the group to which it is given, invariably the word is later appropriated by the same group or a part of it, to serve as its ethnic or national name. Thus, a group defines and maintains its own identity usually in the context of interaction with others.

The name, *Europe*, for example, is believed to originate possibly from *Ereb*, an Assyrian word for *the West.* It was used with disdain and obvious feeling of superiority by the Greeks to identify the unknown territory west of the Aegean Sea as distinct from the older lands in Asia Minor. To those Greeks (Hellenes) in the East, or the land of Sunrise, the West or the land of Sunset was hardly touched by civilization and, as such, was considered the home of barbarians: ''the speakers of unintelligible babble."[15] In the African continent, several regions were similarly victims of *otherness,* as evidenced in many a place named by European traders as critical resource zones for their desirable items: the Gold Coast for gold*;* the Ivory Coas*t* for ivory*;* the Slave Coast for slaves and the Cameroons (from Camaroes), for shrimps. Most of these geographical indicators later became the formal names of European colonies. It is, of course, common knowledge that a little over a century ago, a young English spinster coined the term, "Niger area", which finally metamorphosed into 'Nigeria'.

ETYMOLOGY OF THE NOUN, 'IGBO': ORIGIN AND MEANING

In the opinion of some people, "Ndi-Igbo" means "Ndi gbo o" or ''the Ancients": Ndi (people), gbo o (ancient).[16] In the Igbo language, the First people or Aboriginals would ideally translate *Ndi bu'uzo nambu* and not *Ndi gbo o*. 'Ancient' is not synonymous with 'aboriginal.' Translated vaguely as *the Ancients, Ndi gbo o,* fails to distinguish the primary group among those ancients. In other words, the term is so broad in its meaning that it cannot, and should not be interpreted as the first people or the aboriginals. Rightly, the first or the earliest settlers among any *Ndi gbo* o would be *Ndi mbu*. Hence, in leaving the meaning of *Ndi gbo o* vague, its proponents rendered their theory suspect.

Others contend that 'Igbo' is the name given to "the hunter-gatherers in situ in the Niger-Benue confluence area," by the earliest migrants.[17] However, neither the name-givers – "the earliest migrants", nor the named – "the hunter-gatherers" are sufficiently identified by

the proponents of this theory. They failed to furnish the name(s) of either party prior to their encounter with each other. The point is that the hunter-gatherers may have had a name that possibly had nothing to do with Igbo.

Yet, others entertain entirely different views: some hold the view that the people known today as the 'Igbo' originated from the Jews; [18] others, that the names Uburu and Hebrew are related. Not a few contend that the word, Igbo, is a contraction and corruption of the word 'Hebrew.'[19] Beliefs like these are the fall out of the Hamitic myth: the historical fallacy that assigns the origin of anything of worth among the Igbo to a world outside. Hence, none of these views needs to be taken seriously as historical accounts of Igbo origin. "Available archeological evidence suggests," as has been pointed out, ''that the Igbo are a branch of the Negro race which may have originated in the area along the latitude of Asselar and Khartoum: more or less in the northern fringe of the savanna. Therefore, the Igbo homeland cannot possibly lie north of this latitude, that is, as far north as Egypt, the Holy land or Yemen."[20]

Some people believe that 'Igbo' is the name of the founder of 'Amaigbo' which, as they claim, means "the homeland, cultural center of the Igbo"; "cradle of Igbo society, nucleus of its expansion."[21] Even though this claim can be seriously challenged on other grounds, it also fails to address the meaning of the noun, Igbo. Others maintain that 'Igbo', stands for "communities of people" or "the people." This view rests on the notion that as a prefix or a suffix in many a community name, 'Igbo' denotes people: Igbo-Ekiti (the people in the heartland); Igbo-Eze (the royal people); Igbo-Ukwu (the Great people); Obigbo (the ancestral temple of the people).[22] But the notion raises some questions: If Igbo means "a community of people" or "the people", to which people does it refer? A community of the Igbo only? Or does it apply to other ethnic groups? Would a "community of people," for instance, the Yoruba, the Efik or the Igala be referred also as '*Igbo*', even in the Igbo language? The author doubts it.

It would seem fortunate that Linguistics came to the rescue with the discovery that "in Old Idu and modern Yoruba Languages, these

pristine forest dwellers – the direct descendants of the oldest sojourners on the planet" were called Igbo. **Igbo** means Ancient and Forest people''.[23] Validity of this discovery appears to be supported by the English-Yoruba, Yoruba-English dictionary, which defines 'Igbo' as a noun that means 'forest; land covered with trees.' [24] In the light of this definition, the phrase, Ndi Igbo, can be interpreted Ndi (people), Igbo (the forest): hence people of the forest or forest dwellers. This interpretation is the more credible when compared to the definition of 'Igbo' as "an ethnic people of Nigeria; a person of Igbo descent; the language of the Igbo people," by the Igbo-English dictionary. [25]

It would appear that this definition addresses the question: who are the Igbo*?* Rather than what does the word, Igbo, mean*?* Obviously, it does not address the etymology and meaning of the noun.

A related or like-mistake is evident in the conventional notion that the Igbo are "the people who inhabit the southeast of Nigeria"; an error embedded in the facile assumption that in Nigeria all the Igbo live in the southeast. The fact is that Southeast Nigeria is neither inhabited solely by the Igbo nor do all the Igbo live there. Other ethnic groups such as the Ibibio, the Efik, and the Ijaw, inhabit and share the area with the Igbo. Similarly, some of the Igbo who are settled west of the Niger and outside of the southeast share their area with other ethnic groups.

It would appear that the ancient Idu and Yoruba people, who probably inhabited the grassland area, gave the name, *Igbo,* to mark themselves apart from *others* who possibly inhabited the forest belt. It would appear, too, that originally the term was not the name of a particular town, people, or ethnic nationality, but a common name for all who inhabited the humid woodlands or forest areas of the tropical zone of Western, Central, and even Eastern Africa. Thus, the noun, Igbo, originally a mere geographical concept devoid of deeper cultural association or ethnic connotation, stood for a collective of cultures or societies rather than for one culture or society. We will elaborate on this in the next chapter**.**

NOTES

1. Chancellor Williams, *The Destruction of Black Civilization: Great Issues of A Race From 4500 B.C To 2000 A.D* (Chicago: Third World Press, 3rd Edition, 1987), 49-53; Lee R. Berger, *In the Footsteps of Eve: The Mystery of Human Origins,* (Washington D. C: Adventure Press, 2000), chap. 1.
2. Judith A. Carney and Richard N. Rosomoff, *In the Shadow of Slavery: Africa's Botanical Legacy in the Atlantic World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 9.
3. Basil Davidson, *Africa in History: Themes and Outlines Revised and Expanded Edition* (New York: Simon and Schuster Paperback, 2005), 9-10.
4. Carney, *op. cit.*, 10-12.
5. John N. Oriji, *Traditions of Igbo Origin: A Study of Pre-colonial Population Movements in Africa, Revised edition* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1994), 23-24.
6. Michael Crowder, *The Story of Nigeria* (Faber and Faber 1978), 1-23. See Okoi Arikpo, *Who Are the Nigerians? Lugard Lectures 1957* (Baltimore: Penguin Books Inc. 1967), 17–18.
7. In point of fact, the term "Hausa" refers to a language. "Hausa-land", which refers to the area it is spoken, comprises peoples of different cultures, social organizations and even languages. Among these peoples are the Fulani, the Shaw-Shaw, the Beriberi, the Nupe, the Gwari, the Lere and several other tribes in northern Nigeria. Simply stated, "Hausa" is not 'a people', or an 'ethnic group'; its indigenous speakers are the Habe who spread it even among their conquerors, the Fulani.
8. A. E. Afigbo, *Ropes of Sand: Studies in Igbo History and Culture* (Ibadan: University Press, 1981), 4.
9. Successive migratory bands of people, as Anya pointed out in his lecture, may have entered the area at different times. Being essentially of the same stock and given a large expanse of land that could accommodate fresh immigrants, their integration with the earlier ones could not have led to major conflict situations. See Anya. O. Anya, *The Environment of Isolation: The Ecology and Sociology of Igbo Cultural and Political Development*, (Owerri: Ministry of Information and Culture, 1982).
10. Jimmy Carter, *Beyond the White House: Waging Peace, Fighting Diseases, Building Hope* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2007), 147–220.
11. Sleeping sickness, *(trypanosomiasis)*, caused by the tsetse fly; river blindness; *(onchocerciasis)* transmitted through the stings of tiny black flies; elephantiasis, *(lymphatic filariasis),* caused by the mosquito. Anya, *The Environment;* Jimmy Carter, *op.cit.*

12. Botanically, these are: i) Oji: Kola nut tree: *Cola acuminata*; ii) Ji: Yam: *Dioscoria*; iii) Ube: Pear tree: *Dacryoides edules;* iv) Ogiri/Ogili ugba: Castor-oil plant: *Ricinus communis*: v) Akpaka/Ugba/Ugbakala: Oil bean tree: *Pentaclethra macrophylla*; vi) Nkwu: Oil palm tree: *Elaeis guineensis;* and vii) Ukwa: African breadfruit tree*: Treculis Africana*. Anya, *The Environment*; M. J .C. Echeruo, *Igbo-English Dictionary: A Comprehensive Dictionary of the Igbo Language, with an English-Igbo Index,* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998)
13. Roland Oliver and J. D. Fage, *A Short History of Africa* (Penguin Books Ltd. 6th ed. London, 1988), 16.
14. Insight on this was gleaned in part from Dr. Pius Adesanmi's article, '*Wole Soyinka, Igbo Cyber Discourse, and the Myth of the Good Yoruba*' in African Writer.com
15. Norman Davies**,** *Europe: A History: A Panorama of Europe, East and West, From the Ice Age to the Cold War, From the Urals to Gibraltar* **(**Harper Perennial Edition. 1998) xix, 1137.
16. C. C Ifemesia, *Traditional Humane Living among the Igbo: An Historical Perspective* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension), [reprinted 2012], 5.
17. Catherine Acholonu, *They Lived before Adam: Pre-historic Origins of the Igbo: the Never Been Ruled* (Owerri: Flyann Ltd., 2009), xxviii -.xxix, 152.
18. William L. Andrews and Henry Louis Gates Jr. (eds.), *Slave Narratives (Literary Classics of the United States Inc.)*, 2000, 62.
19. This view which has been described as the "oriental mirage" or the 'Hamitic myth' is the erroneous notion that certain aspects of the culture of the black race have their origins among either the Jews, or the Egyptians or any of the lands in the Middle East. Afigbo, *Ropes of Sand,* 6, 182.
20. Ibid. 6 -7.
21. Oriji, *Traditions of Igbo Origin: op. cit.* 97.

In the Awka - Orlu axis, the communities, Orlu, Isu Njaba and Amaigbo seem to constitute the core area from which people migrated to the various areas that formed the Southern, the Southeastern, and the Northeastern sub-cultural zones of Igbo land. This core area is in the Isuama heartland. Amaigbo, possibly, was the base from which many of the migrants settled several communities in the Igbo Southeastern zone just as Isu Njaba and Orlu were the centers of the migration to the Southern and Northeastern zones. Although these Isuama communities were southern centers of Igbo migration, they were not the first settlement of the ancestors of the Igbo. The fact is that initial Igbo migration was in a north-south direction. Therefore, it could not have started from Amaigbo in the south. Thus, the community could not have been the initial settlement of the ancestors of

the entire ethnic Igbo nationality. Besides, it is most unlikely that a village group, a mere segment of a clan, would be named after an ethnic nationality. Hence the problematic claim that Amaigbo is "the home" or the "cradle of Igbo society" or nationality (as her two Isuama sister communities are not.) In the view of this author, if the founder's name was 'Igbo', 'Amaigbo' would correctly translate 'the entrance or gateway to a settlement in the woods or the home of a forest dweller(s).

22. C. K. Meek *Law and Authority in a Nigerian Tribe* (London, 1937), 1; C/F: M. D. Jeffreys, cited in Oriji, *Traditions of Igbo Origin,* 2.
23. Acholonu, *They Lived before Adam*, 152. .
24. Kayode J. Fakinlede, *English-Yoruba, Yoruba-English Modern Practical Dictionary* (New York: Hippocrene Books Inc. (3rd Printing, 2008), 165, 561.
25. M. J. C. Echeruo, *Igbo- English Dictionary: A Comprehensive Dictionary of the Igbo Language with an English-Igbo Index* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), 69.

CHAPTER 5

WHO ARE THE 'MODERN IGBO'?

Among the measures adopted by the British in 1787 to enforce the abolition of the Slave Trade was the founding of the colony of Sierra Leone on the coast of West Africa for the settlement of freed slaves. By the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the number of slaves recaptured, freed and re-settled in the colony had grown significantly, partly as a result of the increasing difficulty most who wanted to return to their native land, were experiencing.

For instance, in 1886, the Royal Niger Company, a British Trading agency, began to treat not only the French and German traders but also Africans from Sierra Leone, Lagos and the Oil Rivers, as foreigners. By subjecting the Africans to stringent tariff regulations and high custom duties, the company's policy adversely affected the repatriation of freed-slaves: an exercise that had been going on since the 1850s between Sierra Leone and what later became Nigeria. In particular, the policy severely checked the expatriation to the recently explored River Niger territory, thereby preventing the Sierra-Leoneans, who wanted to be repatriated to the territory, from making an important impact there as repatriates had done in Yoruba land, thirty to forty years earlier.[1]

However, the policy did not deter the freed slaves. One of its unintended effects, ironically enough, was growth in the number of those identifiable as initially hailing from the Bight of Biafra. Their numerical strength was such that they constituted a significant percentage of Sierra Leone's total population. With some of their members quite influential in the society, they were able to form a community of their own. Multi-ethnic and multi-lingual in membership, the group identified itself as one people held together by geography rather than by language. By freely and proudly taking the name, Igbo, the members not only distinguished themselves as a

group apart, but also imbued it with a new meaning and new significance. In removing not only the sense of shame and embarrassment, but also the fragility of self-awareness and self-esteem hitherto associated with the name, they restored the humanity and dignity of their people. Not the least, they saved their kinsmen and women from the trauma of diminished existence which they suffered over the centuries by being derogatively named by someone else.[2]

Interestingly enough, as a toponym for the Bight of Biafra, Igbo, retained its significance as a geographic indicator and, as such, served as a great source of unity for all who hailed from the territory. In other words, it served as a reference term for all who were exported from the Bight of Biafra: who spoke the same language in the area; who knew only the names of their respective villages/communities; who had no general national name and whose origin could not be traced to any of the known costal groups, and descendants.[3] By reinvesting their ancestral homeland with respectability, they liberated it from the imposed status of a slave-land.

DISCOVERING AND IDENTIFYING 'THE *IGBO AREA*'

How then did a particular people, a specific ethnic group, come to be called *Igbo*? Who gave the name and why? These are very relevant questions and have become necessary because they are about a people who consider naming an essential process by which an individual or a group is socially accepted. The Igbo, as presently known, did not and still do not give names merely as tags by which the bearer may be distinguished. To them, names are aspects of personality and cultural identity: they bear great significance and meaning intimately associated with events in one's life; they indicate the essence of the individual; they tell where the individual came from, as well as carrying certain positive spiritual vibrations.[4] Often reflecting the circumstances of the bearer's birth or origin, each name is given with respect and the intent of instilling the owner with a sense of self-worth.

As already noted, Europeans remained quite ignorant of the hinterland of the coastal ports of the Bight of Biafra for well over three

centuries. By effectively shielding the people in the interior from any direct contact with foreigners, the African partners in the Slave Trade denied their European counterparts access to the sources of slaves and thus retained monopoly of control of the inland trade. For most of the period, there was less need for direct contact with the hinterland as long as slave supply and delivery to the ports was plentiful and constant. However, the practice of barring them from access to the interior ended with the abolition of the odious trade in 1807.

The abolition spurred the exploration of Africa for commercial and humanitarian reasons: to carry legitimate European trade into the interior of the continent; to wipe out the slave trade at its roots; and to learn more about a large ethnic nationality in the Bight of Biafra. For these purposes, the British sponsored several explorations: i) the 1830 expedition by the Lander brothers to explore the mouth of the River Niger; ii) the celebrated but disastrous 1841 humanitarian expedition to further explore the area for trade and a better understanding of the boundaries of its various peoples; iii) the fruitful 1854-1856 expedition by William Balfour Baikie, and iv) the 1857 expedition for opening the first Church Missionary Society mission station by the Anglican Church, and the first trading posts by the trading companies, at Onitsha.[5]

Of these explorations, the 1854 -1856 expedition was unique in respect of its impact on a large, but little known ethnic nationality. On the basis of Dr. Baikie's observations, the first map of that nationality group was etched as bounded on the north by the Muslim groups; on the south by the delta and coastal trading states; on the east by the Cross River and the peoples living along it; and on the west by the kingdom of Benin. It was identified as a territory never once visited by a European. As never done before and on the basis of a common language, the demarcation established the boundaries of the largest and most numerous linguistic people in the Bight of Biafra, [6] and in fact, in the Civilization of the Clearings.

The exercise entailed awareness of the existence of a multitude of ethnic nationalities in the territory; recognition of diversity in their geographical sizes and demographic strengths; and appreciation of the

unique place and importance of the most dominant group among them. The map defined the area as comprising only one ethnic and one language group; identified the group as dominant in the territory, and gave it the name by which the larger territory, the Bight of Biafra, had hitherto, been known. By thus assigning the name, 'Igbo', to only one society, the exercise literally stamped everything in the area with the basic characteristics of that society. In other words, by localizing the concept, it 'made' everything in the area – the people, the society, the culture and the land, -- Igboid. In so doing, the exercise unwittingly forced each of the other ethnic groups within the Bight of Biafra to seek its own identity.

Following their settlement at Onitsha in 1857, European missionaries, in particular, added to the map the few details they could garner from members of their congregation: names of village communities, their relative positions from one another, the different ethnic neighbors and the distances between them. By thus putting certain place names on the map, the native names on a list, and by classifying groups and communities, the missionaries and to some degree, the trading companies, aided the explorers in laying a foundation for colonial power in Igboland.[7]

YOU ARE IGBO? NO. WE ARE NOT

Acknowledging the assistance he received from the Igbo-speaking freed slaves in both Sierra Leone and Fernando Po in charting the boundaries of the 'Igbo area', Dr. Baikie noted that he found among them "people who would not admit to being Igbo." Some even affirmed that they never heard the name until they came to Sierra Leone. Though ironic, this need not arouse much surprise. As noted earlier, even though most of the freed-slaves could not identify their native community, they called themselves 'Igbo' on the basis of geography rather than a common language. In the absence of a common national name, many of them before, and much later after their captivity and the end of the Slave Trade, denied being Igbo. The fact, too, is that most of the indigenes in the Bight of Biafra homeland

who were similarly ignorant of the name, did not identify with it. They neither entertained a notion of a shared common culture nor exhibited any feeling of belonging to any polity larger than their clan. Rather, they identified themselves by the name of their own communities only.

Due to the historical association the name, Igbo, had with slavery and servitude, those individuals in the homeland who were familiar with it claimed that it referred to their inferiors and not to themselves. This resentment seemed more strident among the riverine people and understandably so: they were partly responsible for the spread of its abused usage, and had long differentiated themselves as *ndi Olu*, (riverine people, presumably non-slaves) from *ndi Igbo* (the Igbo, upland people, putatively slaves). For example, early in the twentieth century, as the missionaries were claiming that their first mission station, Onitsha, was situated in Igbo land and the population were Igbo, the Onitsha people themselves resented the identification. Frances M. Dennis, a missionary at Onitsha, who had this experience in 1908, noted that

> The Igbo seem to divide themselves up into three sections: the Ika on the western bank of the Niger, despising greatly the Ibos on the eastern side, denying strongly their relationship to the Ibo, and using the term Ibo for a slave; the Ibos between Onitsha and the Cross River despising the Isus as much as they themselves are despised by the Ikas, [hardly] proud to call themselves Ibos; and the Isus who occupy the northern parts of Ibo land.[8]

As late as the 1970s, Richard N. Henderson would stretch the interpretation with the claim that the Olu/Oru was riverine or riverine-derived, slave-dealing, and kingdom-associated people; and the Igbo, as upland, slave-providing, and kingship-lacking people.[9]

In his youth, the author overheard elders in his community speak of *Oru n'Igbo* (Ndi Oru na Ndi Igbo) by which they merely indicated a geographical distinction between salt-water or riverine people on the one hand, and the upland or dwellers in the hinterland, on the other. On none of those occasions was either term used to connote or denote

freedom or servitude. The word, Olu/Oru, it should be noted, is an Igbo name for Igala, the Olu Mmiri, referring to the riverine Igala.[10]

BECOMING 'IGBO': THE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY

The absence of the feeling of belonging based on a shared 'Igbo identity' began to change following the introduction of British colonialism in 1900, and the founding of Nigeria in 1914. Although with differing interests, imperial administration, missionary Christianity and capitalist commerce shared a common objective: the colonization of the territory. To colonize is to subjugate a people in order to exploit them: a goal often achieved by imposing imperial authority over them and where necessary, fusing their small communities into larger units for economic and administrative efficiency. Through various measures in the pursuit of their particular interests, the trio – commerce, colonialism and Christianity -- brought about many social, cultural and political changes in Nigeria.

Their common interest and positive disposition towards cash economy encouraged its introduction in the society and thus ensured the demise of trade by barter. On the conviction that Nigeria is a motley of ethnic groups, imperial Britain imposed a unitary administration on the people, while Euro-Christianity with its alien educational philosophy and practice introduced literacy, which heralded a new era in the society. The three also introduced salaried employment which in turn contributed to the emergence of a clerical class of workers, and the rise and growth of urbanization. Urbanization stimulated the migration of both skilled and unskilled workers from rural areas to the cities. Most of the Igbo migrants sought jobs in European firms and commercial houses, government offices, schools, related institutions, and the East-North railway line then under construction. The result was that by the early 1950s the Igbo constituted between 40% and 55% of the total strangers' population in the major Nigerian cities.[11]

One effect of this urbanization was large scale contact and intermingling of peoples of varying backgrounds, languages and

cultures. However, the contacts between groups in the urban centers often took place within certain fixed patterns. For example, in most of the cities, especially in the north, immigrants were commonly confined to areas separate and apart from those of the indigenous population. This notwithstanding, the migration not only exposed the Igbo to a whole new multi-cultural environment, but also awakened them to the disparity, especially in the socio-cultural development between their linguistic group and its counterpart, the Yoruba. This disparity was most noticeable in the field of education.

Aside from opening their eyes to the power inherent in a broader pan-Igbo identity, the awareness impressed on the more educated elements the need to eschew the divisions between subgroups; to identify even with the once-debasing term, Igbo, and to appropriate it as their ethnic name. It appears also to have influenced independent communities hitherto fiercely protective of their local autonomy to federate in groups with such names as Mbano, Mbaise, Mbasa/Mbanasa, and Mbaitolu/Abaetete: the group of Four, Five, Seven and Nine Villages, respectively. This, it should be pointed out, was occasionally instigated by the colonial authority to achieve economic and administrative efficiency.

Furthermore, the awareness hastened the founding of such pan-Igbo organizations as Igbo State Union; institutions as Igbo National High School; cultural emblems as Igbo National Day, and associations as the Society for Promoting Igbo Language and Culture (SPILG). Most of these had branches in urban centers in and outside of Igboland. SPILG, in particular, addressed such issues as standardizing the Igbo Language through a common official orthography, and describing and defining the Igbo culture. The missionaries, the colonial officers, ethnographers, Igbo converts and clerks, academics and local politicians were all involved in these activities. The institutions and the organizations aimed at concretizing Igbo-ness by enlightening the indigenes to appreciate their identity.

By making more recognizable the meaning and importance of being Igbo, the identity "acquired more and more relevance to an increasing number of people." For example, by encouraging them to

use Igbo language and culture in their daily activities, the language and the culture were not only promoted and strengthened, but Igbo consciousness was also developed and spread. Although the objective of fashioning a common orthography was not achieved[12], the attempts at it resulted "in a generally accepted notion that there existed a single language shared by all Igbo people". In so doing, both the language and the culture impacted the emergence of the intellectual content of Igbo identity. Furthermore, the ideas of the various actors were "important, not so much for the characteristics they ascribed to the Igbo, but for their arguments as to why these characteristics were considered 'typically Igbo', and the grounds for distinguishing between 'Igbo' and 'non-Igbo.'[13]

Given the existing linguistic and cultural differences between various groups from the different parts of Nigeria, the interaction of an immigrant ethnic group with members of its host community in an urban setting invariably resulted in mutual stereotyping. This phenomenon was hardly improved by the development of 'party politics' in Nigeria in the 1940s, and the prominence gained and long retained by the political domain, as the most practical context for the articulation of ideas on ethnicity. Soon after the granting of a limited form of self-government for the different Regions in 1951, many an interest came to be defined in ethnic terms. The political discourse was engrossed in accusations of domination and marginalization by one ethnic group against the other.

Extensively reported in local newspapers, the accusations created awareness of the existence and relevance of ethnic identities among members of the different ethnic groups. The large Igbo membership in the pan-Nigerian National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (N.C.N.C) then under the leadership of an Igbo indigene, soon attracted the envy of its counterparts, the Action Group (A.G.) in the West, and the Northern Peoples' Congress (N.P.C) in the North. While the leadership of the Action Group felt uncomfortable with the threat posed by Igbo competition for positions hitherto monopolized by the Yoruba in the Nigerian Public Service, the leadership of the Northern

Peoples' Congress accused the Igbo of domination because of their noticeable presence in the region under its control.

Thus, by awakening the populace to the existence of ethnicities and the relevance of their identities in Nigeria, the discourse unwittingly contributed to the development of Igbo ethnic identity.[14] Any hopes of reversion to the status quo ante, was finally sealed by the pogroms and genocide in Northern and Western Nigeria, which in the mid-60s decisively defined in no unmistakable terms, who was or was not Igbo.

CLARIFYING THE CONCEPT 'IGBO' IN HISTORY

Dmitri van den Bersselaar correctly observed that the different groups of the people who inhabit the 'forest region' may have witnessed contacts among themselves either by migration, trade, religion, ritual or even wars. "Mythical charters", he rightly noted, "may have existed between communities within as well as outside the culture area, and the cultures interwove. The result was mutual exchange of values and such cultural elements as the system of market weeks, the New Yam Festival, the extended family structure, the egalitarian ideology, and the concept of the bad bush".[15] He is also on safe ground in affirming that "such significant aspects of the culture complex that are nowadays recognized as characteristic of Igbo culture – the title societies, age grades, or osu slavery etc. -- were only present in certain parts of the area."[16] Equally valid is the assertion that "the boundaries between what today are Igbo and non-Igbo were not at all clear"; "there were strong bonds between parts within the area as well as with communities outside the area."[17]

However, the author takes issue with Dr. Dmitri's claim that "the pre-colonial history of the present Igbo area does not prove the existence of a clearly defined cultural or historical ''proto-Igbo unit'' or that "there was no slumbering Igbo national culture merely waiting to be awakened".[18] The effective demarcation of the Igbo cultural area by Dr. Baikie's 1857 expedition would seriously challenge that claim. As shown, that demarcation demonstrated awareness of the existence of a

multiplicity of ethnic nationalities in the territory. It also recognized the diversity in geographical sizes, demographic strengths, and linguistic differences among the nationalities and, above all, appreciated the presence and unique place and importance of the most dominant group in the area. Hence, it identified the group with the name by which the larger territory, the Bight of Biafra, had been known.

Furthermore, Dr. Dmitri contradicts himself by admitting that the 'Igbo culture' is "part of a much broader West African complex starting from Cameroon in the east to Ghana and beyond in the west." He even asserts that the complex has "many differences and local peculiarities."[19] The fact is that the said 'West African complex' is the same thing Grier and Al-Sulaiman referred to as 'The Greater Igbo Nation', although they erroneously ascribed to it subtribes that never existed. Known to the ancient Bini and Yoruba as 'the Igbo' -- people of the woodlands, and multi and varied as they and their societies were, these people lived under one civilization**:** the Civilization of the Clearings, which is coterminous with the complex.

But today only one society bears the name. It would appear that by conferring on the society the name of the civilization of which it was/is a member, the giver accorded the said society special recognition among its fellows. It would also appear that the society's gain was its neighbors' loss. For instance, by assigning the name, Igbo, solely to a specific socio-cultural group, the assigner localized the concept, thereby rendering everything in the entire Bight of Biafra or even the larger area of the Civilization of the Clearings, Igboid. Consequently, it unwittingly forced each of the other ethnic groups within the territory to seek its own identity.

'Modern Igboland' does not appear to be too different today from what it was in the distant past, in the Civilization of the Clearings. For one thing, it appears that despite centuries of population dispersal from the core areas, the physical geography of Igboland has remained essentially the same. In a manner of speaking, it does not seem to have suffered a 'sea change'. For another, the Igbo of today inhabit practically the same area as did their ancestors in ancient times. For a third, the noun, Igbo, by which their ancestors, with other members of

their civilization used to be identified in antiquity, is now solely borne by them. Nowadays, the name belongs to the Igbo of Igboland: the Igbo of the southeast as well as those west of the River Niger.

This means that among its counterparts in the Civilization of the Clearings, the 'modern' Igbo society is the only one that since antiquity has continuously and without any break been identified with the appellation. Differently stated, the Igbo of today -- the Igbo of the southeast as well as west of the River Niger — are the rightful successors/inheritors of the Igbo of antiquity. They have always been Igbo, hence ancient and modern. It may be in this sense that some contend that 'Igbo' means *Ndi Gbo: the Ancients.*

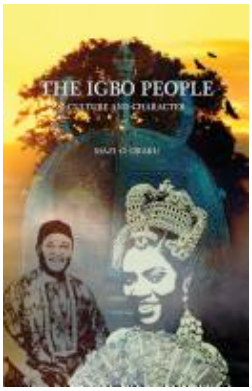
NOTES

1. Chieka C. Ifemesia, *South-eastern Nigeria in the 19th Century: An Introductory Analysis* (1978), 48–52; J. C. Anene, *Southern Nigeria in Transition: 1885 1906: Theory and Practice in a Colonial Protectorate (*Cambridge, At the University Press, 1966) Chapters 3 and 4
2. See Chinua Achebe, *Home and Exile* (Anchor Books Edition, 2001*),* 70.
3. It should be noted that self-identification was not unique to the group. There was in Sierra Leone at the time another group of people who also regarded themselves as distinct because they were united as the children of the ancestor Oduduwa. *B*ecause its members greeted themselves with the word, 'Eku', 'Aku' or 'Oku', they were known as 'Aku'. By 1800, there was no proper national name for them; even the very idea of unity was a novelty. Although Europeans were identifying them and their country as *Yoruba*' (a name possibly derived from 'Yariba', the Hausa term for the dialect of the Oyo sub-group,) other sub-groups such as the Ijebu and the Egba, initially resented the identification. (P. E. H. Hair, *Early Study of Nigerian Languages* (London, 1967), 4, 11). Ironically, the foreignness of the name appears to have enhanced its acceptance later, as a national name by all the sub-ethnic groups. Thus *Yoruba* came to describe the language, the country and people of all the subgroups. [Cf. *Africa Remembered*], 299.

   By the 1850s, Reverend Samuel A. Crowther, an indigene but ex-slave ordained minister, designed Yoruba orthography that modified and popularized the Oyo dialect as the standard written form of the language of all the sub-groups. He achieved this with the international co-operative effort of Christian European missionaries in Sierra Leone's Freetown, Abeokuta, his native land, as well as linguistic experts in Europe. The

standard orthography enabled the Yoruba to write down their thoughts in their own language and to read a variety of instructive and stimulating works for over a century. See Hair, *Early Study,* 17. See also Dmitri van den Bersselaar, *In Search of Igbo Identity: Language, Culture and Politics in Nigeria, 1900 – 1966* (Leiden, 1998), 63.

4. Victor C. Uchendu, *The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria,* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965), 60.
5. D. van den Bersselaar, 65–66.
6. Ibid. 66-8.
7. Ibid. Also C. C Ifemesia, *Southeastern Nigeria in the 19th Centyry...*, op.cit.
8. Frances M. Dennis, "Iboland: Southern Nigeria," *Church Missionary Review* (July 1, 1908), 407.
9. Richard N. Henderson, *The King in Everyman: Evolutionary Tends in Onitsha Ibo Society and Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972).
10. Nwankwo T. Nwaezeigwe, *The Igbo and Their Nri Neighbours: A Study in the Politics of Igbo Culture and Origins* (Enugu: Snapp Press, 2007), 94.
11. This large-scale migration has been attributed, among other factors, to the absence of urban centers in the Igbo area. Although prior to the 19th century, empires and kingdoms flourished with some urban centers in the northern and western parts of later-day Nigeria, the lure of employment opportunities in those centers, was not noticeable among the Igbo. Not until the colonial period and, particularly, the second and third decades of the 20th century, did the lure become noticeable. See van den Bersselaar, *In Search of Igbo Identity,* 87.
12. It has been observed that the unhappy experience of the missionary, Dr. Schon, with speaking Ibo to the incomprehension of his Igbo audience in the 1841 expedition was, in retrospect, an ill omen of the problems that lay ahead in the development of Ibo literature: problems that persisted to the 1960s. The failure of the early attempt in the 1880s to use one dialect only - the mixed dialect, Isuama, - foreshadowed the failure of the attempt in the early decades of the 20th century, to use another mixed dialect, the Union Ibo, throughout Iboland. See Hair, *Early Study*, 75, 86; van den Bersselaar, 120–23.
13. Dmitri, *In Search,* 33-4.
14. Ibid. 97.
15. Ibid. 53.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.



Tracing the origin of the Igbo people back to the Bantu in antiquity, and exploring the etymology of the word Igbo, the author notes that, although the name is not native to the language, the people have always inhabited the same geo-physical environment, held similar worldview and shared, in all its diversity, the same culture. Out of this common ecology and cosmology emerged the Igbo Personality: the egalitarian democrat and collective individualist, Pan-Nigerian in outlook

The Igbo People

Culture and Character