

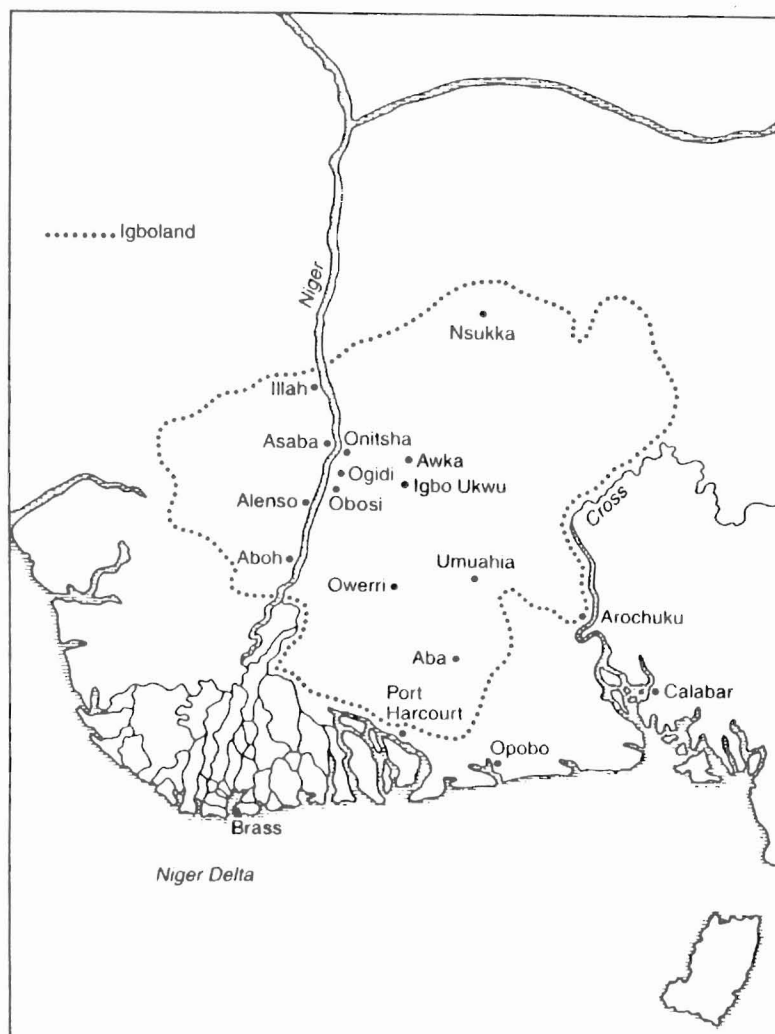
## *Igbo Culture and History*

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### **Early Igbo History**

The Igbo (or Ibo) people form one of the largest ethnic groups in Africa, with about 15 million living in Nigeria and another million living outside. Their farming communities are broadly situated between the Niger River in the west and the Cross River in the east, stretching from delta swampland near the southern coast through tropical rain forest to open grasslands to the north. The Igbo language has dozens of dialects, which developed because Igboland was an aggregation of self-contained towns and villages, separated from each other by dense bush. Before the twentieth century, it would have been incorrect to speak of the Igbo as a single people; they were made up of over two hundred separate groups. Although their customs and languages were clearly related, each group could have been considered a distinct society, encompassing perhaps twenty or thirty villages. An Igbo person who traveled thirty miles in Igboland might have had great difficulty making himself or herself understood. However, during the colonial period (1900–1960) many Igbo people ventured far from home and congregated in urban centers, at the work place, and in institutions of higher learning. Many realized that what they thought were distinct languages were different dialects of the same language and that all Igbo-speaking people had the same basic culture and sociopolitical organization. In that sense, the concept of a common Igbo identity is a product of the twentieth century.

An Igbo creation myth relates that in the beginning the surface of the earth was covered by water and no humans lived on it. Then one day Chukwu (God) created the first human family, composed of Eze



Map 3 Igboland, showing the major places listed in the text



A man and his wives receive a gift of yams from their daughter's husband

Nri, his wife, his sons, and his daughters. Eze Nri and his family stood on the top of an anthill and had nowhere to go because the land was submerged. They were also hungry. Chukwu looked down and took pity on their condition. He gave Eze Nri a piece of yam and said, 'Take this, it is edible.' Eze Nri and his family ate the yam and found it was good.

The following morning, they were hungry again and Eze Nri prayed to God for more yam. Chukwu listened attentively and then gave him some yam seeds, saying, 'Plant these and you will have an abundance of yams.' Eze Nri accepted the yam seeds with gratitude. He looked around him and said to Chukwu, 'But the land is covered with water.' Chukwu instructed him to send for Awka blacksmiths, who came with their bellows and blew until the land was dry. Chukwu then asked Eze Nri to sacrifice his first son and his first daughter and plant the yam seeds in their graves. Eze Nri obeyed. Shortly afterwards, yam and cocoyam tendrils sprouted from his children's graves. Eventually, Eze Nri harvested yams and cocoyams and shared them among the Igbo people.

This story establishes the Igbo people's belief in a supreme god (Chukwu) who created all things and demanded obedience. It also suggests that religion has long been an integral part of Igbo life. The myth points to the origins of agriculture, the antiquity of the family, and the importance of iron working in shaping the Igbo community. Above all, since this myth makes no mention of migrations from distant places – as opposed to the majority of African traditions of origin – it suggests that the Igbo people have occupied their present locale for a very long time, a suggestion that is confirmed by archaeology.

Archaeological evidence shows today's Igbo people and their ancestors have been settled in roughly the same geographical region for two thousand years or more. Much of the material culture of present-day Igbo people resembles that of the people who occupied certain locations in Igboland around 1,000 BC. At Afikpo, present-day pottery resembles that produced about 3,000 years ago. At one of the Afikpo sites, the number of stone implements gradually decreased as the amount and variety of pottery increased, showing the transition from hunting and gathering to agriculture.



Igbo people have smelted and forged iron for centuries, and their oral traditions are rich with accounts of iron working and iron use. At Lejja, a small town situated about ten miles south of Nsukka, an ancient iron-working settlement existed where smelting was done in a pit or bowl furnace, initially using rather primitive techniques. Over time, the Igbo improved their technological skills and began to produce sophisticated metal tools such as spearheads, arrowheads, swords, hoes, knives, earrings, finger rings, bracelets, anklets, hammers, anvils, tweezers, scissors, and cooking pots. By the first millennium of the Christian era, they were already producing bronze masks and figurines, of the types that archaeologists discovered in Igbo-Ukwu.

The widespread use of iron tools enabled the Igbo people to make better use of the forest. With iron tools they grew yams (their principal staple food), cocoyams, bananas, and plantains. Iron tools also helped them to cut down fruits from the tall palm trees, and process them into edible and medicinal oils. Scholars have attributed the current high density of the Igbo population to the antiquity and effectiveness of yam cultivation and their skills at exploiting the oil palm.

At its fully developed stage, the Igbo agricultural system was based on shifting cultivation, a type of rotating cultivation where the same fields were planted for several years in succession and then were left fallow to regain their fertility. Crops did best on forest land cleared for the first time, but some people, either unwilling or unable to handle the back-breaking amount of work required to clear virgin forest, planted their yams continuously on old farm lands and reaped poor harvests as a result. In *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo's father is portrayed as too lazy to clear forest land; he prays to the spirits to grant him a better harvest but is rebuked for his own lack of initiative.

## Social and Political Structures

A striking feature of Igbo society was the lack of centralized political structures. The Igbo lived in autonomous villages and towns, ruled by their elders. With a few exceptions, they organized themselves in patrilineages – lineage groups organized along lines of descent from

father to son. Relationships were based on blood ties, and each person traced his or her descent to three groups. First, a person belonged to the smallest social unit known as *uno*, or house. This was a natural family, consisting of a man, his wife or wives, and their children. The second group was the *umunna*, or lineage, composed of a number of related houses. Finally, a group of lineages formed a compact village or town, *obodo*. This was the highest territorially defined authority of the Igbo. A town or compact village was sometimes named after its founder, or after a striking geographical feature that best described its location. It might also be named after the most important sociological circumstances that surrounded its foundation. It is important to recognize that the members of a lineage were blood relatives and that each lineage was a semi-autonomous unit within a town. Each house, lineage, and town was headed by a headman, *onyisi*, who acquired the position by virtue of his age. Town meetings were usually held in the town square, but the most important lineage and house meetings were held in the *obi* (meeting shed) of the most senior elders. Interaction between towns was limited and was regulated by goodwill, mutual respect, and diplomacy. Wars often broke out when these failed.

#### Cross-cutting Ties

The Igbo communities were known as extremely democratic, yet they had no centralized governments. How, then, did they achieve democracy?

The Igbo subscribed to the principle of direct participation in government. Their entire social and political structures revolved around the idea of cross-cutting ties. The five most important cross-cutting institutions were the councils of elders, age-groups, councils of chiefs, women's associations, and secret societies. Without them, the Igbo society would be starved of its essence and would disintegrate. As we shall presently see, the traditional Igbo communities did indeed fall apart in the twentieth century when the Europeans destroyed their cross-cutting ties in the process of colonial rule.

#### Council of Elders

Matters affecting lineage members were discussed at the meetings of its elders, *ndisi* or *indichie*, with the assistance of the adult members



The beautifully carved door of a senior man

of the lineage. In inter-lineage disputes, elders from the affected lineages met to discuss solutions, with the oldest man in the gathering presiding.

The authority of the lineage head derived from the group's respect for him as the oldest living representative of the founding ancestors. He was the custodian of ancestral lands, the keeper of the ritual objects that symbolized political authority, and the group's spiritual and temporal head. Even though he was the religious, executive, and judicial head of his lineage, he would not act without their approval. No action would be taken until an issue had been fully argued at a lineage meeting and some degree of consensus achieved.

#### Age-groups

An age-group association, known as *ogbo* or *otu*, was composed of men (or women) who were of about the same age. All residents of a town born within a few years of each other belonged to the same age-group, with separate sections for men and women. The association was named after a major event that was taking place at the time of its members' birth. For example, there were the Biafran War age-group, *ogbo aya Biafra* (those born between 1967 and 1970), the Second World War age-group, *ogbo aya Hitler* (1939–1945), and the influenza age-group, *ogbo ifelunza* (1918–1921). The exact age-span in an age-group varied from town to town, but the most common were the three- and five-year intervals.

The age-group system enabled societies without written records to remember past events. It also helped them assign special duties and responsibilities to the different segments of the community, in accordance with the principle of seniority.

The junior age-groups (age 15 and below) did minor jobs like fetching water, cleaning footpaths, sweeping the streets and town squares, and running errands.

Men in the middle age-groups (from about age 16 to about 40) formed the fighting forces. If five years separated one age-group from the next, there would be up to five distinct age-groups in this category. In the event of a war, each age-group acted as a separate regiment, under a leader who belonged to an older age-group. The middle age-groups also felled trees and cleared the bush at the beginning of each

planting season. They functioned as the executive arm of the government and would apprehend fugitives, for example. After marriage, young women would become active in the appropriate women's association (see below).

The senior male age-groups (those aged 40 and above) were responsible for judicial matters. They usually decided when a town should go to war, how an offender should be punished, when the various agricultural cycles would open and close, and when the annual festivals would be held.

The age-group system promoted respect. Juniors deferred to seniors and expected the same treatment when they advanced to higher grades. The members of a group acted together, and the friendships they cultivated in childhood remained intact throughout life.

#### **The Acquisition of Titles and the Council of Chiefs**

The Igbo people emphasized personal achievement; hereditary succession to titles would have contradicted notions of leadership and fair play. Some Igbo men managed to acquire prestigious titles, enabling them to be acknowledged as great men or chiefs. Titled chiefs formed their own councils and represented their communities to outsiders.

Most Igbo men eagerly sought admission into the council of chiefs, but not all could succeed. Every Igbo man began his life as an apprentice. A young boy accompanied his father or uncle to the farm and rendered as much assistance as he could. As he grew older he learned that marriage, wealth, and the acquisition of titles enabled individuals to advance socially. Until a man was initiated into certain titles, he could not dress in certain ways, or wear hats of certain colors, or shake hands in certain ways, or take a piece of kola nut before other people.

Titles cost money; only men with exceptional abilities and good luck ever bought all the available titles. The taking of the higher titles demanded the payment of expensive initiation fees, accompanied by elaborate feasting and dancing. Throughout Igboland, a man who failed to progress beyond the most junior titles was a man without status in the eyes of his people. Whatever his age, they looked upon him as a boy. His age mates might make him run errands for them. In

Awka he might be termed *agbala*, a woman. In Illah, he was taunted, *isi igwu*, meaning, 'head full of lice,' or 'louse breeder.' When he died, they buried him without dignity, and the mourning period was brief. Status attainment was clearly linked to the acquisition of wealth through hard work.

The highest title in many Igbo communities (and the one alluded to in Okonkwo's village) was *ozo* (or any of its variants: *eze*, *nze*, *alo*, and *ichie*). To qualify for the *ozo* title, a man must have acquired the junior titles and discharged all the duties normally assigned to members of the junior title groups. He must have accumulated enough wealth and completed the ceremonies connected with the second burial of his father. Thus, no man could attain a status that might equal or exceed his father's while the latter was still alive.

The Igbo believed that no man could inherit immortality; it must be acquired through a process of title-taking called *ichi-echichi*, 'to secure the breath of life', to attain immortality or godship. The Igbo word *chi* represents invisible forces, spirits, and personal gods; it is the root of such words as Chukwu (God), *ichie*, an immortal or a titled person, and *ndi ichie*, title holders.

Only men who achieved this ritual death and resurrection could attain immortality; an *ozo* man was a person who had received the gift of immortality. He was no longer an ordinary human, but a god. To purchase the highest title was, therefore, to be born again, to be admitted into the association of rulers, *otu ochichi*, and to be initiated into the cult of the ancestors, *otu ndichie*.

At the secular level, the highest title spared its holder the indignity of manual labor. It guaranteed him a seat in the council of chiefs. It reserved for him portions of fees paid by new initiates into the title association and gave him rights to certain portions of livestock slaughtered in his lineage. A titled man was greeted with high-sounding salutations such as *igwe* (His Highness) and *ogbu efi* (he who slaughters bulls). The *ozo* title lost its appeal in the twentieth century when colonial officers stripped traditional Igbo chiefs of their power and then subordinated them to British-appointed warrant chiefs and Western-educated Africans.

### Women's Associations

Igbo women had their own clubs, age-group associations, and title associations that complemented those of men. Women controlled certain spheres of community life, just as men controlled other spheres. Women were perceived to possess superior spiritual well-being and headed many of the traditional cults and shrines. In Achebe's novel, for example, the oracle is served by a priestess. Women also gained status by amassing wealth through trading, farming, or weaving, and were treated as *ndi ogalanya*, wealthy persons. In certain districts, wealthy women married other women, and 'fathered' their own children.

Like an Igbo man, every Igbo woman began her life as an apprentice. From a very young age a girl assisted her mother at home, on the farm, or in the marketplace. As she grew older she learned from experience that hard work, marriage, and membership of certain associations enabled women to advance socially. One of the most important women's associations was *otu omu* (the Omu society), headed by a female functionary, known as Omu. The desire to join this prestigious association acted as an incentive for hard work and thrift, for only women who had enough wealth to pay for the initiation ceremonies were admitted. The members of the Omu society acted as a pressure group in political matters and imposed fines on men and women who disturbed the peace of the marketplace. They punished quarrelsome women and those who broke certain taboos, like those prohibiting incest and adultery. It was perilous for any man, no matter how influential, to provoke the anger of this association.

The leaders of the Omu society attended the meetings of the councils of chiefs and elders and participated in discussions affecting the welfare of the citizens. Though they would not themselves take part in wars, they could decide when to urge the male warrior chiefs to start one.

The Omu society and several other women's associations, acted as checks and balances in the social and political organization of Igbo communities. The *otu umu ada* was an association of women born to a lineage or town, while *otu inyeme di* was an association of women married to the men of a lineage or town. In theory, every married woman belonged to both associations, while an unmarried woman belonged only to *otu umu ada*. Whereas men participated in the



An elaborate coiffure for a girl whose marriage is being negotiated



politics of their home towns alone, women exercised influence in the politics of both their home towns and the towns of their marriage.

Of special importance was the control women exercised over local trade. In the Igbo world view, a marketplace was not simply a place to buy and sell goods; it was also a ritual, political, and social center. The power women exercised over the organization of local trade derived from the fact that most local traders were women. They alone could best serve the needs of those who converged in the marketplace for commercial and other purposes. Caravans of long-distance traders made their way to local markets, often accompanied by a large number of noncommercial specialists, such as the agents of important oracles, smiths, carvers, priests, diviners, and doctors. Although most long-distance traders were men, their prosperity depended upon the careful regulation of local markets. Igbo women's associations upheld gender balance and equality. Their political and social activities were very useful, though men occasionally felt they were contentious.

#### **Secret Societies**

Some secret societies were exclusively for men, some for women, and others for both sexes. Very little is known about the secret societies because the men and women who joined them took their oath of secrecy very seriously. Besides, the Igbo were averse to divulging information that might hinder the effectiveness of their secret societies; many of them functioned as the mouthpieces of ancestors, oracles, and spirits. In important judicial matters, masked ancestors (the *egwugwu*, or *egungun*) might appear and pronounce a verdict. In Chapter Ten of *Things Fall Apart*, for example, we see the *egwugwu* emerge to hear a series of legal cases. When that happened, no one contested their judgment, because no one could pretend to be wiser than the ancestors or the spirits. And no one ever disclosed the identity of the individual behind the mask, even if he happened to recognize the voice or the walk of a particular elder.

#### **Igbo Marriage Customs**

Marriage also served to bring households, lineages, and even towns together. The Igbo regarded it as the cornerstone of their whole social structure. Discussions leading to marriage were taken seriously, and they involved not just the immediate families of the bride and groom



A masked figure, representing an ancestral spirit

but also their entire lineages. The Igbo believed that every adult male and female must marry and build their own household. They valued children very highly, and marriage was a requisite first step towards bringing them into the world.

The key unit of agricultural production was the household. In the absence of mechanization, the size of a household was crucial in providing enough labor. Realizing that monogamy was a sure avenue to poverty, most husbands practiced polygamy. If a man failed to act promptly to increase the size of his household, his wife might bring additional wives to him.

Having several women in a household enhanced not only a man's status but also the prestige of the first wife. As the head woman of the household, she shared every title that the man might acquire. She presided over household deliberations, most men preferring not to get personally involved, except in emergencies. Junior wives enjoyed the security and prosperity that large households provided. In addition, Igbo women had rights and freedoms that they jealously guarded. They lived in their own separate houses, cooked for themselves, and raised their own children. They grew crops, part of which they sold in the marketplace, and kept the proceeds. Moreover, Igbo laws and customs permitted an unhappy wife to leave.

## **Igbo Religion**

The line that separated the religious life from the secular in Igbo culture was as thin as air. The Igbo believed in the Supreme Being (Chukwu) and in life after death. Chukwu lived far away in the sky; he was the origin of all things and directed the activities of all things. The names the Igbo gave their children expressed these beliefs. For example, an Igbo family might name a baby Amaogechukwu ('God's time is the best'), or Chukwukelu ('God is the creator'), or Chukwun-yelu ('God gave me this wonderful gift').

Moreover, Igbo proverbs, folk tales, and incantations testified to their belief in the existence of God. Since nothing happened by chance, everything – good health or illness, fortune or misfortune – was attributed to the will of God. They also believed that one must live in

peace with one's ancestors to be rewarded with good health, good luck and many children. Misfortune and untimely death were consequences of living in disharmony with the higher beings.

Igbo people had no symbols of Chukwu because no one knew what he looked like. They rarely kept special altars or shrines for his worship, since he was everywhere at the same time. Every transgression was ultimately an offense against him, and they constantly prayed that those trespasses that they might unknowingly have committed be forgiven them. The Igbo people nursed a deep reverence for the mysterious nature of Chukwu. They were not sure how to approach him, but they knew that he was a spirit and that those who worshipped him must do so in spirit. They therefore communed with him through the major spirits and ancestors.

The Igbo also believed in the existence of the Ekwensu, the equivalent of Satan, whose prime occupation was to lead people astray. Ekwensu had several servants who helped him carry out his evil thoughts. One of them was death itself, the malicious being who would visit a man on the day he enjoyed life the most.

Ekwensu used people to commit crimes against other people and would then turn around and punish the same people who served him. Ekwensu was Chukwu's principal enemy and at the same time his faithful servant. Acting on the powers bestowed on him by Chukwu, he would cause an evil doer to suffer or die in a strange manner. Should a man meet with an unexpected misfortune, it was a punishment for some crime he had committed. The crime might have escaped the attention of his neighbors but not the watchful eyes of the higher forces. Until a sinner atoned for a transgression he might not even remember committing, he remained in a state of conflict with the higher forces, who would punish him continuously. When a person felt disturbed by certain inexplicable misfortunes, he would approach a diviner, who might recommend that the unseen forces be propitiated. Fear of unconsciously offending the higher beings was responsible for the large number of propitiation rites.

The Igbo also approached the higher forces when they wanted special favors. Should a family want to have many children, it would approach a diviner who might recommend some sacrificial offerings. Sacrifice was an important element in Igbo religious ceremony.

Igbo people had a wide range of spirit symbols that often took the form of natural phenomena. Among these were spirits of the rivers, streams, lakes, rain, hills, caves, lightning, iron, the farm, the earth, strength, fertility, and witchcraft. A spirit symbol might have its own priest or priestess. Certain professions had their own patron gods who assisted them in their endeavors. A patron god might be connected to rain making, hunting, farming, trading, or iron working. For example, by offering the right sacrifices, prayers and invocations, a rain maker could persuade the rain god to produce rain.

Rivers, streams, lakes, and rain had life-sustaining qualities, and symbolized purity, cleanliness, coolness, freshness, fertility, and longevity. The water spirits were important deities. With water, the Igbo washed away evil and uncleanness. Important cleansing rituals were performed near, or in, rivers and streams.

The most dreaded spirits were associated with fire (*oku*) and thunder (*amadioha* or *akpala*). Fire symbolized raging flames, burning heat, burning forests, dryness, drought, bad harvest, high fever, miscarriage in pregnant women, and death. When a community indulged in excessive sin, its territory might become a fiery surface, and humans, livestock and plants might die. Only qualified doctors could cool the land again.

Any object could be turned into an object of worship if consecrated. Even after its consecration, the object would never acquire the qualities of a god, nor would it ever become a god; instead it would become a religious object, assuming the name of the spirit it represented. Its power would depend on the strength of the spirit that lived in it. A body of water, a piece of metal, a stone, or even a piece of bone might serve as an object of worship; however, it is not the stone or bone that is being worshipped; but rather the spirit that it represented. Many outsiders have jumped to the conclusion that the object is the god itself.

The most common object of worship was *ikenga*, a wooden carving, that symbolized a man's strength and success, distinguished by its prominent horns. Anyone could buy an *ikenga* in the marketplace and have a qualified priest invoke the right spirit into it, after which it would acquire the strength of the spirit it held. Until the necessary act of invocation had been performed, it remained a mere object. Every

Igbo household had an *ikenga*. A man never parted with his *ikenga*, although he might replace one destroyed by fire, for example. He consulted his *ikenga* before he embarked on any project, and he would offer libation in its name whenever he served palm wine in his house.

Of equal standing was a man's personal god, *chi*. *Chi* was similar to the Christian concept of a guardian angel. A person's *chi* followed him or her throughout life, and could be either benevolent or malignant. A person with a good *chi* was always successful in his or her endeavors, while a person with a bad *chi* was an unfortunate person, who would labor without reaping.

The Igbo people did not believe that a man's *chi* controlled his entire destiny. No matter how 'good' his *chi* was, a person would achieve success only if he worked hard and led an upright life. They emphasized the importance of hard work in the saying 'If a person says "yes", that person's *chi* says "yes".' In addition, the Igbo believed that diviners and other medicine men and women could intervene on behalf of an unfortunate person to change his or her malignant *chi* into a benevolent one. Most private prayers, sacrifices, and invocations were directed toward chasing off misfortune and keeping oneself in a state of harmony with one's *chi*.

At the group level, one of the chief deities of the Igbo people was Ani, the earth deity, the great mother goddess, and the spirit of fertility. Every lineage and, indeed, every homestead had a shrine dedicated to her. Ani had her own special priestesses, who played leading roles in many aspects of community life. They officiated during all religious ceremonies that concerned Ani and presided over all matters involving crime against the earth goddess. Their presence was vital when matters concerning incest, birth, death, and burial were being discussed. The ultimate resting place for all men and women who had led a good life was in the bosom of Ani. On the other hand, all men and women who practiced witchcraft or died a shameful death, including those who committed suicide, had no place in Ani's abode. Usually their corpses were left unburied in the 'bad bush.'

Like some other belief systems, the entire religious system of the Igbo people revolved around the idea of birth, death, and reincarnation. The Igbo believed that when elders died their spirits did not go

away for good, but prowled unseen, looking after the welfare of the living members of the lineage. An elder would pour libations to his departed forebears before he drank his palm wine. He would also give a piece of kola nut in their name as he asked for their protection and guidance. The Igbo often offered animal sacrifices in the names of departed ancestors. If a baby boy was born soon after the death of his grandfather, this child could have been no other person than the old man reincarnated and might be named Nnamdi or Nnadi ('Father is back'). If a baby girl was born soon after the death of her grandmother, she might be named Nnenna.

The Igbo people believed that infants could also be reincarnated, but these babies usually put their parents through unnecessary pain. Babies often died soon after birth only to come back again to the same parents, as a result of which they were called *ogbanje*, meaning those who 'come and go.' Some women were known to have lost up to five children, none of them living long enough to witness the birth of the next child. To break this circle of birth and death, a diviner would have to be consulted. In Achebe's novel, Ezinma's mother has buried nine of her ten children; she is desperately afraid that Ezinma too will prove to be an *ogbanje*.

#### **The Enigma of Twinship**

Until the beginning of the twentieth century, the Igbo threw away twin babies soon after they were born. People today are very reluctant to talk about it, for they cannot explain why they often prayed to God (Chukwu) for many children, yet when twins or triplets were born, the infants were left in the forest to die. This was not an Igbo phenomenon alone, however. Many African groups regarded the birth of twins as supernaturally charged and took different steps to deal with it. For example, the San people of southern Africa would destroy one or both babies. Among the Ashanti, the babies would be forfeited to the chief; their parents would place them in a brass basin, and then carry them to the chief's palace soon after birth. On the other hand, twins born into the royal family were killed at once to prevent the confusion and turmoil their birth might cause in terms of succession and inheritance.

The Igbo believed that there was something abnormal and mystical

about twins. When people ask for rain, they do not expect a flood; twin birth represented excessive fertility and had to be kept in check. After leaving the babies in the bush to die, the mother would undergo extensive rituals intended to prevent her from bearing more twins. If appropriate measures were not immediately taken, not only the parents of twins but the entire community might suffer harm.

### Homicide

Spilling the blood of a townsman or townswoman was a serious offense against the earth goddess. However, criminal justice systems varied, especially in regard to how law breakers were punished. For example, whereas most Igbo groups would hang a murderer, in certain towns a husband who killed his wife was hanged, while a woman who killed her husband was not. In some towns a woman who killed her co-wife was not hanged, because both women belonged to the same man.

If a murder occurred in precolonial times, certain age-groups might seize the property of the murderer and destroy his house. If he ran away, they might hold his relatives hostage until the murderer was brought in and hanged. In other areas, if a murderer escaped, a waiting period of three or more years was allowed, after which his lineage paid a fine and gave one of their daughters to the family of the dead man. These examples demonstrate the Igbo people's abhorrence for blood-letting. Accidental homicide might attract a lighter punishment, but no killing ever went unpunished. Of equal importance was the principle that restitution must be made to the victim's relatives.

Killing was permitted only during war, but combatants made every effort to keep casualties to the minimum. Even in war, killing another was a transgression against the earth goddess, Ani. Cutting off the heads of one's enemies, practiced by certain Igbo groups and bragged about by Okonkwo in the novel, was neither accepted nor practiced by the majority of Igbo people. When men returned from war, they performed elaborate cleansing rituals before they could rejoin their lineages. Homicide was only one item in a long list of acts treated as abomination, *nsò*. When an act of abomination was committed, a qualified doctor had to be brought in at once to remove it. An offender, together with his or her kin group and the wider community,



would remain in a state of ritual turbulence until these rituals were completed.

### **Igbo Oracles**

Straddling the religious and secular worlds were the Igbo oracles. Oracles were religious shrines that discharged both judicial and oracular functions and acted as centers for divination. They received messages from dead relatives and passed them on to the living. They explained to curious relatives why a person had died. They warned individuals and whole communities about impending danger and offered advice on ritual matters. A community might consult an oracle if disturbed by a high death rate, or an unduly high rate of twin births, or successive bad harvests. Oracles also acted as courts of appeal in judicial matters. Individuals might take their dispute to an oracle if they failed to reconcile their differences. If a man felt that he had been wrongfully accused of a crime, he might take the matter to an oracle, who might exonerate him or confirm the guilt.

Oracles were feared and respected for miles around; one example was that of the Aro oracle, known to Europeans as the Long Juju. The Aro oracle was consulted by traders from many areas to settle business disputes. Oracles were housed in secret groves, surrounded by thick bush. The home of an oracle was a forbidden territory, for the Igbo believed that anyone who saw an oracle would surely die. Only the chief priestess (or priest) ever looked upon the face of the oracle; supplicants never approached an oracle directly. The chief priestess of an oracle served as the mouthpiece of the deity that dwelt in the shrine. Her words were final in all matters, because the forces she represented were higher than all secular powers. To disobey the orders of the priestess was to disobey the deity she represented. The chief priestess might combine her oracular services with other vocations like trading or farming. She and her agents received gifts of money, foodstuffs, and livestock for their services, and they might demand certain sacrifices as well.

The Igbo believed that their oracles would offer impartial decisions in judicial matters. So great was the confidence they reposed in their oracles that they would willingly pay large sums of money to consult them and accept whatever verdict they might pronounce. Most of the

agents of the oracles traveled far and wide as medicine men, diviners, traders, smiths, or carvers. They used their knowledge of the communities they visited to direct litigants to the oracles they represented.

Up to this point, I have presented a rather generalized description of Igbo society before the coming of the Europeans. We must remember that the Igbo clans were numerous and autonomous, and there were many variations in culture and political systems deriving from their relative isolation from one another and their different relations with such neighboring kingdoms as Benin, Igala, Ijo, Efik, and Urhobo. What one town permitted might be forbidden in another. Despite these variations, the Igbo people shared certain basic cultural attributes that set them apart from other groups in West Africa. Isolation ceased to be a factor in the twentieth century, following the spread of wage labor and the construction of motor roads and railway lines, but even before that external influence intensified when Igboland was flooded with European immigrants and their African employees. In the pages that follow we examine how the European presence drastically modified Igbo society.

### **The Igbo People Meet the Europeans: The Era of Informal Empire**

The Igbo people's meeting with the Europeans in the nineteenth century would change their history. European slave traders had exported substantial numbers of Igbo people from the Bight of Biafra to the New World. Nonetheless, no European had penetrated the interior of Igboland before 1830.

The events that led to the establishment of a European presence in Igboland were tied to the politics of abolition. Realizing that the slave trade was no longer consistent with their economic interests, the British, who had dominated the trade, championed the movement that eventually brought it to a close. While the abolition debate raged on, however, certain interest groups in Europe and America formed societies to push European cultural, commercial, and political influence into the African interior. One of the most famous was the African

Association, which sponsored many expeditions into Africa. Expeditions such as those led by Mungo Park, Hugh Clapperton, and Richard and John Lander reassured the British public that the Niger River emptied itself into the Atlantic Ocean and that European traders had done business in the coastal towns at the mouth of the river for over three centuries. Encouraged by these successes, the British government and private organizations sent further expeditions up the Niger River to establish contacts with the Africans of that region. These Niger expeditions were undertaken by missionaries and traders, sometimes accompanied by government officials.

Between 1832 and 1854, expeditions up the Niger River risked devastation by tropical diseases. The West African interior came to be described as the 'white man's grave'. The expeditions continued despite these risks. In 1854 medical workers confirmed that the use of quinine minimized death from malaria, and other advances in medicine and technology facilitated further European penetration.

The increasing European demand for palm oil and an expanding African demand for imported European goods encouraged the British to establish trading posts in Aboh, Onitsha, and Lokoja in 1857. Pleased with the booming trade, some Igbo communities invited European traders and missionaries to come and live among them.

Friendly relations began to crumble after 1875, however, when the palm oil business entered a long period of economic depression. Palm oil prices fell in Europe while the prices of manufactured goods were on the rise, leading to trade disputes between European and African traders. Conflict also developed around the question of security on the Niger. African chiefs had developed a system of trade that guaranteed peace along the Niger River and on the mainland. The chiefs of the various states collected tolls, duties, or tributes from passing traders; European traders initially paid the tributes because they needed the protection of local chiefs. When British gunboats began to ply the Niger River more frequently in the 1880s, however, European traders began to refuse to pay these tolls, arguing that the chiefs did not provide adequate protection. The chiefs relaxed security, and some private citizens took advantage of the situation to organize widespread robberies, sometimes attacking European trading posts and vessels. Obviously, such actions and the retaliation they often provoked

strained relationships and generated violence along the river. This period is often described in terms of 'gunboat diplomacy'.

For some time the British government ignored the appeal of British traders for military assistance. In October 1879, however, in response to a complaint that some citizens of Onitsha had attacked British citizens, the British War Office authorized Captain Burr to bombard the town. Captain Burr anchored the warship *Pioneer* midstream and opened fire. After bombarding Onitsha for two days, Captain Burr led his men into the town, where they 'destroyed every object' they could find. The warriors of Onitsha bravely defended their town but were no match for the better-armed British.

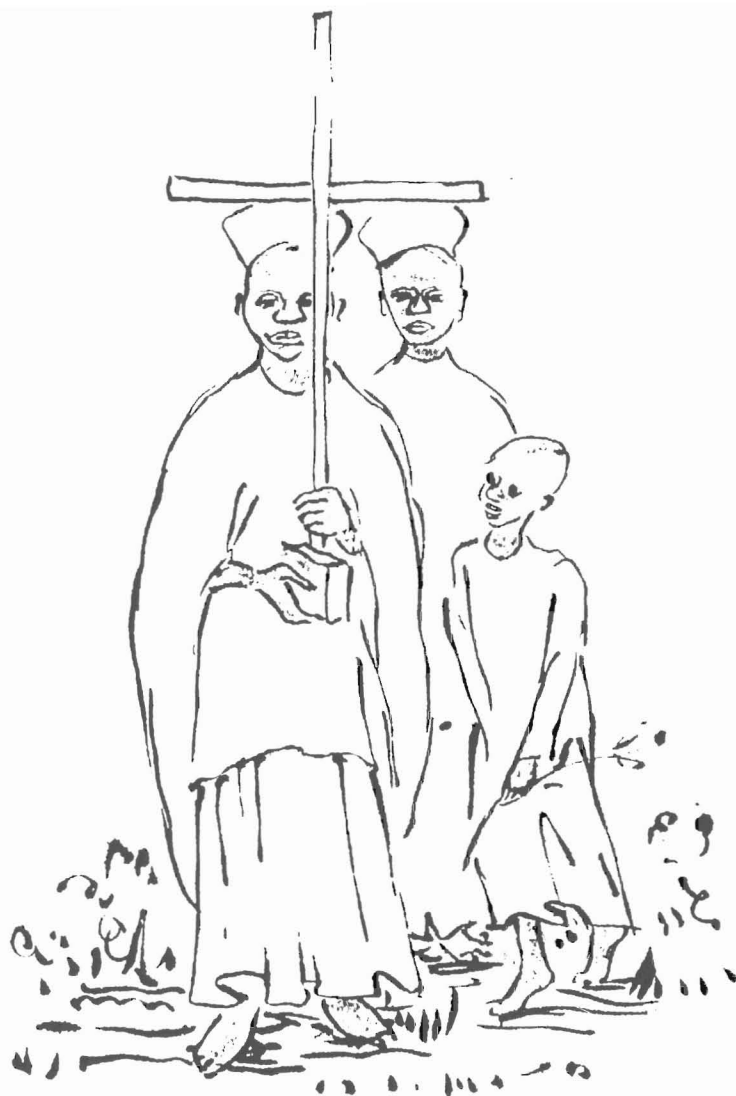
The British justified their action on the grounds that the chiefs were unable to control their subjects, and that it was appropriate for British 'moral force' to curb acts of violence against British subjects. Again in 1883, three British warships shelled and destroyed Aboh, on the charge that some Aboh citizens had attacked a British trader.

#### **The Missionary Factor**

Having protected its traders with warships, the British government could no longer ignore the plight of its missionaries, who also demanded assistance. Protecting the missionaries was far more difficult, however; while traders confined their activities to the banks of the Niger River, Christian missionaries carried their propaganda further inland, provoking indignation among the inhabitants.

The role of Christian missionaries in the conquest of Africa is sometimes underestimated. Missionaries were the first foreigners to venture inland in fairly large numbers, and their accounts of what they found helped stimulate imperial ambitions. Such missionaries played an important role in the establishment of British domination over the Igbo people.

The first Christian missionaries to work in Igboland were agents of the Church Missionary Society (CMS), a branch of the Anglican Church. The CMS established a mission at Onitsha in 1857, and soon after in Alenso, Asaba, and other neighbouring towns. They subsequently opened more stations within a forty-mile radius of Onitsha and Asaba. The fiercest conflicts between the Igbo people and the



Igbo Christians

Europeans raged throughout that same region, conflicts that form the backdrop of Achebe's classic novel.

CMS missionaries were soon joined in the Onitsha and Asaba areas by two different Roman Catholic societies, the Holy Ghost Fathers and the priests of the Société des Missions Africaines (SMA). The Holy Ghost Fathers worked in Igboland east of the Niger River, while the SMA worked on the area west of the river. The CMS worked on both sides of the river. The three most memorable missionaries of that period were Reverend Samuel Ajayi Crowther of the CMS, Father Joseph Shanahan of the Holy Ghost Fathers, and Father Carlo Zappa of the SMA. It is interesting to note that many of the most effective CMS missionaries were in fact Africans. Rev. John Christopher Taylor was an Igbo man, born in Sierra Leone to freed slave parents. Rev. Crowther, later appointed bishop, was a former Yoruba slave. The Roman Catholics, on the other hand, relied entirely on European priests for their missionary work.

The Igbo had adopted a conciliatory stance in their early dealings with the missionaries, because the Igbo religion was pacific and the Igbo themselves respected the religious views of other people. The Igbo usually listened patiently to the Christians and then expected the missionaries to pay equal attention to their own viewpoints. Some Igbo saw the missionaries as essentially harmless, and shrugged at the uncomprehending priests who fraternized with outcasts and gainlessly occupied themselves with preaching.

Yet, if necessary, missionaries were prepared to destroy the entire system of Igbo customs and beliefs in order to convert the people to Christianity. Bishop Crowther himself saw Igbo society as evil, his ministry as a battle between light and darkness. Father Zappa criticized the 'foolishness' of following the religion of their forefathers. Father Shanahan described his mission as a battle against a 'baffling brick wall of failure'. Most missionaries painted ghastly pictures of Igbo society, which they sent back to Europe, and incited European governments and traders against the Igbo.

Missionaries expected British colonial agents to protect them, and, ignoring possible provocation, the British raided many Igbo towns on the grounds that they had harassed the missionaries. Some foreign missionaries actually provided strategic information about the villages

where they worked for colonial armies on punitive expeditions. Encouraged by the British military presence, missionaries intensified their attack on Igbo customs. The new converts themselves became bolder and more intractable.

It took the Igbo a long while to realize that the missionaries were more dangerous than they appeared. In Obosi, the chiefs accosted Bishop Crowther and protested the tendency of the Christians to ignore the objects of worship of their forefathers, to kill and eat sacred snakes and fishes, and to pull down objects of worship and shrines. The chiefs demanded that Christian converts should confess the wrongs done to Igbo gods, pay for the damage, and promise not to repeat those wrongs in the future. In Alenso they murdered several Christians; in Illah and other villages to the south they burned down churches and drove the Christians away. Feeling cornered between missionary intransigence and a reckless imperial drive, the Igbo people fought back.

At this point, we can see a vicious cycle: the forces of the British Royal Company responded to these acts of violence with greater violence. The Royal Niger Company agreed to give official protection to Christians and to attack local communities who threatened them. Incited by missionary complaints that the people of Asaba still practiced human sacrifice, for example, Company forces raided Asaba in 1888 and destroyed half of it.

Despite their official backing, and their initial welcome, the first Christian missionaries made slow progress in Igboland. They had encountered a strong traditionalist society prepared to defend its customs.

### **The British Annexation of Igboland: The Era of Formal Empire**

The actual British conquest of Igboland began in January 1900, following a growing intervention in Igbo affairs. The bombardments of Onitsha and Aboh in 1879 and 1883, respectively, had been authorized to protect British traders, and the destruction of half of Asaba in 1888 was intended to protect Christians. It was only in 1900

that the British imperial government declared Igboland a protectorate and embarked upon formal conquest.

#### **Igbo Resistance to Colonial Rule: The Ekumeku Movement**

Some Igbo communities rejected British annexation and backed this up by preparing for war. Even before colonial rule was imposed, many Western Igbo towns had suffered economic, military, and political decline as a result of the combined activities of British traders, imperial agents, and Christian missionaries. This may well explain why the earliest and the fiercest military clashes took place in Western Igboland. Many of these battles were fought under the umbrella of the Ekumeku movement.

Western Igbo communities launched the Ekumeku movement in 1898 to resist the disintegration of their society and to halt the advance of British imperialism. The Ekumeku wars were not a sudden outburst but the climax of a long period of political disturbances touched off by British cultural, commercial, and political ambitions on the Niger. Organized under the leadership of a union of titled chiefs, the movement achieved 'a far-flung coalition' against British military pressure. The Ekumeku warriors were young men, drawn from the town clubs and secret societies. They accepted silence and guerrilla tactics as their military strategies. Only men who took the oath of secrecy enrolled for service. Summoned through coded messages, they held their meetings in secret places. They selected several targets and attacked them simultaneously, creating panic among the European and Christian communities. They earned the nickname 'the Silent Ones' because of the unique way they silently carried out their activities. The Western Igbo resistance was finally crushed in 1914.

#### **Resistance Movements East of the Niger River: The Aro Expedition**

British operations in Eastern Igboland began in 1901. The best documented of these operations was the Aro expedition of 1901-02. The Aro were great traders and entrepreneurs, and had long met the needs of the hinterland peoples for imported European goods. They commanded widespread influence and respect among their neighbors, both because of their commercial expertise, and because of the role that the Aro oracle played in the judicial systems of the region. These



economic interests motivated the Aro trading chiefs to unite several Igbo towns and to finance a war of resistance against Britain.

British activities in the Niger Delta and in the Cross River estuary had destroyed the communities with whom the Aro did business. For example, the Efik chiefs of the Cross River valley suffered a severe loss of trade and prestige as a result of the British intrusion. In the Niger Delta, British military forces destroyed Brass and treacherously kidnapped King Jaja of Opobo, exiling him to the West Indies. The vibrant commercial city-state of Opobo then entered a decline from which it never recovered. One finds a direct relationship between British incursions and the eclipse of the indigenous entrepreneurial classes in southeastern Nigeria. The British intention was to subordinate African business interests to European interests, as had happened during the era of the Atlantic slave trade; it was the refusal of Nigerian communities to accept that subordinate position that precipitated further military intervention.

Having defeated the Niger Delta and Cross River estuary communities, the British moved further inland to confront the Aro in 1901. They destroyed the Long Juju oracle and went on to punish neighboring Igbo communities. Somewhat surprisingly, it was neither the Aro nor the dreaded Abam warriors who put up the strongest resistance to the British. Other Igbo communities engaged the colonial forces in a running battle that lasted until after the First World War.

#### **The Consolidation of British Rule in Igboland**

British officials recognized that administering the Igbo people would be even more difficult than conquering them. The greatest challenge was how to rule the hundreds of Igbo towns and villages that recognized no centralized governments. In the Muslim parts of Northern Nigeria, by contrast, the British maintained much of the structure of the pre-existing Sokoto Caliphate; they simply reinforced the power and authority of the ruling classes of *emirs*, and then governed through them. But Igbo political structures were fragmented and small in scale; British officials could not comprehend the democratic genius of Igbo political organization, and felt more comfortable with the familiar hierarchies of kingdoms and empires.

Shortly after the British conquest of Igboland, officials moved to set

up a system of African courts. Their aim was to replace indigenous institutions with a new structure of appointed officials called 'warrant chiefs' – so-called because their sole legitimacy derived from a colonial legal document, the warrant. These warrant chiefs and the British resident commissioners made bylaws and regulated local affairs. They controlled the local police and punished anyone who resisted colonial rule. These men were the tools with which the colonial government hoped to centralize the autonomous political institutions of the Igbo.

The system of warrant chiefs and native courts introduced dramatic changes into Igbo society. The laws that set them up brushed aside traditional judicial institutions. Cases that should have been decided by lineage and village elders – for example, Okonkwo's punishment for manslaughter in Achebe's novel – would now be tried by strangers. The district officers who controlled these native courts might have been trained in English law, but they had little or no knowledge of native laws and customs. As a result, many of their decisions contradicted Igbo ideas of justice.

The Igbo people protested against the warrant chief and native court systems, but their protests resulted only in punitive expeditions. The crisis came to a head in the late 1920s, when the British extended the principle of direct taxation into the 'untaxed provinces' of southern Nigeria. This policy sparked anti-tax riots in 1927–28, and the famous Aba women's riots of 1929. These widespread protests ultimately compelled the colonial administration to reorganize the native authority government in the 1930s and 1940s, leading to an improved system of native administration. British officials finally recognized that the poorly trained, and mostly illiterate, warrant chiefs, together with their small army of court clerks and messengers, could not be relied upon to collect taxes and discharge a host of administrative and judicial functions. Tied more closely to indigenous political institutions, the new administrative system remained operative until 1952, when it gave way to a regional government system that paved the way for constitutional reform and prepared Nigerians for political independence. In October 1960, the Igbo people joined other Nigerians in celebrating national independence.

## Conclusions

The ancient Igbo communities were similar to other peoples who lived in the difficult environments of the premodern world. Their major preoccupations were to live free from crime and sickness, to live in harmony with unseen higher forces, to live in peace with themselves and their neighbors, to have many children and grandchildren, and to produce enough food. Some observers may argue that the Igbo methods were primitive, forgetting that the methods that other societies adopted were equally primitive. We must remember that the England, France, and Russia of today are totally different from the England, France, and Russia of five hundred years ago, just as Igboland of today is totally different from premodern Igboland. The careful reader should avoid making false comparisons between premodern African societies and modern European and American societies.

Still, it is quite striking how rapidly the Igbo people, despite their attachment to their customs, succumbed to European civilization. The fact that it took barely a hundred years (1857–1960) for the British to tear apart a society that had taken thousands of years to evolve suggests that European colonialism was a potent agent of change. Even more puzzling is the speed with which Christianity and Western education swept the Igbo people off their feet. In the long run, even those chiefs and community leaders who had organized and financed the wars of resistance converted to Christianity and helped the missionaries build schools and churches.

One explanation for this sudden rush to embrace Western civilization is that the Igbo were quick to perceive the importance of Western education in the new colonial structure. A second explanation is that the Igbo people were, and still are, often very eager to accept change. A third is that, as the ties that bound the communities disintegrated, the Igbo found new ones in Christianity and Western education. The result is that Igboland now has an unusually high concentration of Christian and Western-educated Africans. The Igbo seek membership in school and church organizations with as much enthusiasm as their forebears sought admission into the ancient age-groups, town clubs,

and title associations. Barely a hundred years ago, Igbo people could hardly read or write. Today, Igbo professors occupy important faculty positions in universities in Africa, Europe, and America. Igbo medical practitioners work in hospitals around the globe, and their scientists, engineers, lawyers, and other professionals render useful services on every continent. Obviously the Igbo people have made material progress. It remains to be seen to what extent they will continue to barter their culture for material progress and be completely devoured by Western civilization.