

Origin or Genealogy of the Igbo people of Nigeria.

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Just as the origin of the term Igbo is unknown, so also is the origin or descent of the Igbo people not yet known with certainty. There has been debates and Hypothesis on the origin of the Igbo people and as such there are thus diverse views about the origin of the Igbo. The origin of the Igbo people have been the subject of speculations and this is yet to be concluded. According to Afigbo:

“The Igbo, like any other group of people, are anxious to discover their origin and reconstruct how they came to be where they are. ...their experiences under colonialism and since Nigeria’s Independence have emphasized for them the reality of their group identity which they want to anchor into authenticated history.”¹

This is because a traditional history of origin of a given people forms part of their thought system and social life.² In the last fifty years a real work has been carried out on the issue of the origin of the Igbo as against the accusations of foreign researchers that Igbo scholars has “a basic lack of interest in grand history”³. But however archaeology, linguistics (glotto-chronology) and ethno-history all these time have yielded useful but non-conclusive evidence.⁴ Hence the origin-question has as such not been fully established. And according to Ilogu, “where the Igbo came from and when, will remain for a long time a matter of conjecture because of the absence of helpful records or archaeological findings by which we can determine the date of settlement or place of origin”.⁵

¹ **Afigbo A.E.** Prolegomena to the study of the culture history of the Igbo-Speaking Peoples of Nigeria’, *Igbo Language and Culture*, Oxford University Press, 1975. p.28.

² **Onwuejiogwu, M.**: An Igbo Civilisation: Nri Kingdom and Hegemony, London, Ethiope Pub. Corp.1981. **In: Jerome I. Okonkwo**, Nri Myth of Origin: An Aro Problem Review, in: AAP, Nr. 48, Dec. 1996, Universität Köln. P. 81

³ **Ottenberg**, 1971, p. 40: In: *ibid*.

⁴ **Thurstan Shaw** (ed), *Discovering Nigeria’s past* . Ibadan, OUP, 1975.; Thurstan Shaw, *Africa and the Origin of Man*, Ibadan univ. Press, 1973. **In: Dr. Ikenga R. A. Ozigboh.**: Roman Catholicism in South Eastern Nigeria 1885-1931: A Study in Colonial Evangelism. Etukokwu Pub. Onitsha 1988. p.20

⁵ **Ilogu E.**; *Christianity and Igbo Culture*. London 1974, p.1.

There are however hypotheses or conjectures on the origin of the Igbo and analysis of the sources that are available (fragmentary oral and local traditions of origin, correlation of cultural traits, and archaeological discoveries) tends to posit three schools of thought on the origin of the Igbo.

A school of thought proposes the *autochtony hypothesis* as a basis of origin.⁶

The word autochtony comes from the Greek word *autochton* which suggests aboriginal. This hypothesis says that the Igbo people have been here – where they are located now - since the beginning of time. It argues they have remained in their present area without being immigrants since they occupied a kind of established position territorial wise. This tends to support the views of Hartle who said that “Archaeology indicates that the Igbo were in occupation of parts of south-eastern Nigeria by 2000 – 3000 BC.”⁷ Afigbo affirms that “the antiquity of the Igbo ...on logistic evidence probably goes back to five or six thousand years.”⁸ This buttresses also the claims of an elderly man, whom Isichei quoted as saying in an Interview: “We do not come from anywhere and anyone who says we come from anywhere is a liar, write it down.”⁹ Supporters of this hypothesis claim that the Igbo according to historical records and oramedial traditions never lived anywhere outside the present Igbo homeland.

A second school of thought proposes an *internal migration hypothesis*. Here some say the Igbo migrated from the Benue or from the Enugu area. Scholars of this school of thought regard the Niger-Benue confluence as the original homeland of the Igbo people and that it was probably from there that the original Igbo hunters and gatherers migrated southwards to the Nsukka-Okigwe cuesta. The Nri myth¹⁰ (of

⁶ Jerome Okonkwo. In: AAP. P. 83.

⁷ Hartle D.D.. Archaeology in Eastern Nigeria. In: Nigeria Magazine, No. 93, June 1967.

⁸ A.E.Afigbo, Ropes of sand: Studies in Igbo History and culture; Ibadan, OUP, 1981, p. 4.)In: Ozigboh Roman Catholicism in South Eastern Nigeria 1885-1931 p. 20

⁹ Isichei E. A History of the Igbo people. Macmillian, London, P. 3.

¹⁰ Nri myth of origin holds that the earth originated from Aro and from there dispersed. According to this Nri myth of origin: “the father of all Nri is Eri. No one knows where he came from. All traditions (*odinani*) acknowledge that Eri

origin) and legends confirms the later development of Agriculture and iron technology in the Nri-Awka-Anambra axis.¹¹ Some archaeological findings in Igbo land tend to give certain scientific evidence to this school of thought.

This work does not however intend to trace the many valuable historical facts on the Igbo recorded by scholars like Afigbo (1972,1980, 1981 and 1987); Achebe (1960, 1983); Uchendu (1965), Isichei (1976); Ohadike (1994) and Onwuejiogwu (1981, 1987). Let us rather explore few archaeological findings as a background to assist us establish facts based on scientific evidence, that Igbo people are traditionally, as migrant, located in an area east of the Niger River or south-eastern Nigeria as argued by this school of thought.

In tracing the origin of the Igbo people, there have been four archaeological findings – the *Ugwuele*, *Afikpo*, *Nsukka* and *Igbo-Ukwu* which have become more relevant. These sites have produced abundant and scientific evidence of the fact that at least between 100,000 BC and 5,000 BC, man has started his cultural drama in what is referred to as “the theatre of Igbo land”¹². Thus, archaeological evidence shows that the Igbo man of today has undergone cultural evolutionary transformations from the African late Stone Age through the Neolithic and Metal Age to Contemporary Time¹³

In his presentation, Anozie argued that, *Ugwuele* site suggests that the makers of the *Ugwuele* stone artefacts might have settled near the site, engaged in hunting and gathering food and trapping animals¹⁴. He distinguished three occupation layers with quartz flakes, small stone tools and points at the lowest layer, followed by hoe-like

came from God (*Chukwu*). It was Chukwu who sent Eri to the Earth. As he arrived the earth was not firm. This made him contact the Awka smiths who used their bellows to dry the soft land. When Eri came, there was no food for the people. He prayed God (*Chukwu*) to send food. God (*Chukwu*) demanded that Eri should sacrifice his first son and daughter to Him (*Chukwu*), etc.. At the end, Eri controlled yam and other food and the earth.” (Jerome I. Okonkwo. Nri Myth of Origin: an Aro Problem Review, In: AAP p. 84.)

¹¹ A.E. Afigbo, Ropes of Sand, p.7. In: Dr. Ikenga R. A. Ozigboh.: Roman Catholicism in South Eastern Nigeria 1885-1931: A Study in Colonial Evangelism. Etukokwu Pub. Onitsha 1988. p.20

¹² Onwuejiogwu, A., “Evolutionary Trends in the History of the Development of the Igbo Civilization in the Culture Theatre of Igboland in Southern Nigeria”. *Abiajoku Lecture*; Owerri, 1987, p.8

¹³ *ibid.* pp. 10-11.

¹⁴ Anozie, F.N., ‘Early Iron Technology in Igboland: Llejja and Umundu’, in special Book issue of *West African Journal of Archeology*, vol.9 1979.

implements, polished stone axe, red ochre, bored stone and pottery of red ware type. The upper layer shows some quantity of grey wares. The interesting thing is the date, which ranged between 2935 BC and AD 15 at the top level. At its closing end of Ugwuele site, two other stone cultures emerged at Nsukka and Afikpo.

Demonstrating further, Onwuejiogwu explains that the upper dates of Ugwuele overlapped with lower dates of Afikpo and Nsukka, which had similar pottery types. The shreds recovered were fired and associated with stone tools and in addition, the pottery is similar to contemporary Igbo pottery found in both Afikpo and Nsukka today indicating a conservative community. The picture that emerges is a Stone Age culture area extending from Nsukka to Aba and from Okigwe to Abakaliki and Afikpo area, with its factory site situated at Ugwuele¹⁵

Notably, the unstable climate changes that commenced in the whole of Africa between 3,000 and 2,000 BC had far-reaching effect in the whole area. However, in the theatre of Igbo culture area, the Igbo-speaking people seem to be concentrated in the Nsukka-Okigwe-Afikpo triangle. It is the view of the linguists that from the distribution and alignment of the languages in the *Kwa* sub-group of the Niger-Congo family, it is most likely that this sub-group separated in the region of the Niger-Benue confluence¹⁶. Anthropological evidence based on glottochronology¹⁷ puts the date of the emergence of this spoken Igbo language from the proto-Niger languages at about 6,000 BC and Lexicostatistics which suggests the relative degree of differences of varieties of Igbo languages spoken today.

From the above account, it is not known exactly where the Igbo language started separating from its *Kwa* sister-languages but it is assumed to be around where the Igbo now live, which would help to explain the absence of Igbo linguistic enclaves or

¹⁵ Onwuejiogwu, A., op. cit., pp.12-13.

¹⁶ Afigbo, A.E., Ropes of Sand: "Studies in Igbo History and Culture. Oxford; Oxford University Press, 1981, p.7

¹⁷ Glottochronology is the technique of collecting and calculating basic words of languages in order to work out centuries of separation. Lexicostatistics is the same technique used to establish relative degree of linguistic similarity and difference (cf. Onwuejiogwu 1987; p,74).

islands in any of the neighbouring areas. Given the emergence of Igbo language by 6,000 BC, it is argued that the Igbo occupation of these areas would be around fourth millennium BC, a date that would make the occupants of the Nsukka area around the third millennium BC most likely Igbo.

However, bearing in mind the probable region of the origin of the Negro race, the Igbo must have come into Southern Nigeria from the northern direction. Thus we have to assume that they came over a broad front in little groups over a long period of time. At first, they would settle in Nsukka area before moving down to the area of Bende Division¹⁸. What is certain about this origin is that it posits the Igbo as having migrated from the northern side, always coming from the North, from outside of Nigeria and this emigration might have taken place almost the same time as that of the Greeks and middle Eastern peoples. Hence a third school of thought suggests Far East descent.

The third school of thought postulates the *External migration theory*. This hypothesis asserts that the Igbo descended from the Jews and as such migrated from the Far East. Talbot writes about a migration set in motion in Egypt in 1870 BC. The Nubian wars of *Amenemhat* or the conquest of Egypt by *Hysos* are believed to have led some Egyptians to settle in the Yoruba country of Oyo and in certain Igbo sub tribal areas.¹⁹ The idea of migration from the East is also backed by Niven, a colonial Officer – who wrote about the Igbo people: “There are living today along the two great rivers of Nigeria many tribes using languages ... (who) ... for the most part have no traditions except the almost universal one... of having come from the East, from Mecca, from Egypt and elsewhere but always from the east.”²⁰

Also similarities in some Igbo cultural and characteristic traits with that of the Jewish culture buttresses the claims of a direct Jewish descent of the Igbo people just

¹⁸ Afigbo, A.E., op. cit., pp.77-78.

¹⁹ Talbot p. The peoples of Southern Nigeria. Vol. 1, London 1926, p. 19.

²⁰ Nwabara, S. Iboland: A Century of Contact with Britain 1860 – 1960, London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1977, p. 17) In: Jerome p. 82.

as Basden writes: “There are certain customs which rather point to Levitic influence at a more or less remote period. This is suggested in the underlying ideas concerning sacrifice and the practice of circumcision. The language also bears several interesting parallels with the Hebrew idiom”.²¹

This goes to support the theory and views of Innocent Okorie, who also holds that the Igbo migrated from the Middle East – Judea and whose story gives even more explicit dates, names and Map of this migration of the Igbo from the Middle East²².

In any case, it is not the aim of this work to go into deep research with the aim of ascertaining any archaeological or scientific proof of this version of the Far East origin of the Igbo.

But however, Josephus Flavius, the famous Jewish Historian describes also in his famous work how Shalmaneser, the King of Assyria took Samaria by force, and how he transplanted the ten tribes into Media and brought the nation of the Cutheans into their country. Thus:

“When Shalmaneser, the king of Assyria, ...besieged Samaria, (he) took it by force in the ninth year of the reign of Hoshea, and in the seventh year of Hezekiah, king of Jerusalem, and quite demolished the government of the Israelites, and transplanted all the people into Media and Persia among whom he took King Hoshea alive; and when he had removed these people out of their land he transplanted other nations out of Cuthah, a place so called (for there is still a river of that name in Persia), into Samaria, and into the country of the Israelites. So the ten tribes of the Israelites were removed out of Judea nine hundred and forty-seven years after their forefathers come out of the land of Egypt, and possessed themselves of the country.”²³

²¹ **Basden G.:** Among the Ibos of Nigeria, 1966, p. 31

²² This Theory stipulates that the Igbo people originated from the Middle East. And that they wandered out of the present day Palestine during the Assyrian Assault in which the ten northern tribes of Israel fell about 718 BC. Characteristic of this Assault according to biblical history and theology is that the Assyrians conquered northern Israel, and transported the people out and planted another people in their land. Many of the tribes in the northern Israel of this time wandered away in different direction and got intermingled among different tribes and cultures and disappeared so to say from history. There is no scientific explanation in biblical research and history of the where about of these tribes of northern Israel that were displaced. So this theory of the origin of the Igbo holds it that a tribe in northern Israel at this time of the Assyrian assault called “*Scheckenigbo*” was among the tribes that wandered out of northern Israel during this time. They supposedly wandered down to Egypt but remembered what happened to them in Egypt and left Egypt again and wandered further south. Along the way according to Okorie, because of fear that the Assyrians could still go after them, they removed the “*Schecken*” in their name and left only “Igbo”. They continued to wander southwest Africa. They intermarried with the people they met on their way, until they came to what is today Nigeria. On reaching the Niger, most of them crossed over and settled and some of them remained west of the Niger, which is the Delta Igbo of today. Cf. **Innocent Okorie;** “The History of the Igbos and the Chronology of Events”, Cecta Pub., New Haven Enugu, 1983, pages 8 -11

²³ **William Whiston,** Transl.: The **New Complete Works of Josephus;** Kegel Pub, Mi. USA 1999, Bk 9, Ch. 14, § 1, p. 332.

It is true that the knowledge of the traditional history and origin of a given people form part of their thought system and social life. They also help to know the *wober* (cause or reason) of their attitude towards life in general, particularly their views on health and sickness. They also help to diagnose similarities with other cultural trends. This trend is in accord with the views of J. Okonkwo, who held that: "...emigrations or migrations of all kinds punctuate cross-cultural transfers or religious and social entities. As a possible support to the above positions, we can remind ourselves of the Greco-Roman and Euro-African contacts."²⁴

Summarising however, many are tempted to agree with T. Shaw, who maintains: "...how man (about 2.6 million years old) evolved into the Negro and how the Negro eventually got to South-eastern Nigeria will likely remain a mystery"²⁵, since there are no documented evidence to prove the positions. One thing however remains distinctive of this folk: the Igbo language.

²⁴ **Jerome I. Okonkwo**. Nri Myth of Origin: an Aro Problem Review, In: AAP p. 84.

²⁵ **Thurstan Shaw** (ed.), *Discovering Nigeria's past*. Ibadan, OUP, 1975.; **Thurstan Shaw**, *Africa and the Origin of Man*, Ibadan univ. Press, 1973. In: **Ozigbo Ikenga R. A.**: *Roman Catholicism in South Eastern Nigeria 1885-1931: A Study in Colonial Evangelism*. Etukokwu Pub. Onitsha, 1988, p. 20.