

Ndi-Igbo from Foundation to the Contemporary Times: The Way Forward

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Abstract

Ndi-Igbo-one of the famous peoples of Africa whose homeland is within the South-East and South-Central areas of Nigeria are of the Negroid stock of sub-Saharan Africa. The foggy origin of the people is x-rayed with a view to having a clearer understanding of the people's foundation in the land they call home today, having been part of the general hominidisation process from time immemorial and living and associating with other peoples around. Since then; how have they been constituted? What is their standing particularly with regard to their world-view in a globalized world? This is a clarion call for the latest generation of Ndi-Igbo to strive on, in view of the challenges and prospects of the new millennium, for the good of the land and people

Introduction

Ndi-Igbo the people to the immediate east of the lower Niger and the South-Central Nigeria, are a sub-set of the Negroid people living in Igboland and speak the Igboid (of the Kwa of Congo - Kordofania language family) languages and identify themselves as Igbo people on the basis of the above and or other cultural affinities. Igboland is geographically situated at between latitudes 5° and 7° north and longitudes 6° and 8° east. This land covers an area of 40,922 square kilometers (Uchendu 1965). The River Niger cuts across the land running through it, from the north to the south. The four other rivers found in the area are Orashi, Imo, Anambra to the east, and Ase to the West. Ndi-Igbo understand their territorial land geographically/environmentally as being in three parts namely: Aniocha (this being the area from the elevated stretch after the Niger valley west of Imo river; Enu-ani (this being the area westward between the River Niger and the area occupied by the Edoid-speaking people), and Oru (this being the vertical stretch lying from the north to the south on the two valleys on the Niger course).

To the north of the land are the Igala, Idoma and Ogoja peoples; to the east are Ibibio, Annang and Oron peoples; to the West are some Edoid - speaking peoples such as Ishan people, and the south, the Ijoid - speaking peoples.

The Igbo can be found today in Abia, Anambra, Delta (in part), Ebonyi, Enugu, Imo and Rivers (also in part) states, where they call their homeland. Besides the ones found dwelling in the said homeland, there can be found, around the world, Igbo people who sojourn in such places as the Diaspora component of the people.

The word 'Igbo' is relatively new as a name given to the land and people in the area described above. It was originally used derogatorily by the so-called riverine Igbo to refer to the Igbo living deep in the back wood (Jeffreys (1956). cited in Andah, Okpoko and Folorunso (1988)). Jeffreys however, later contended that the word means 'the community of people'.

The population of the Igbo today, runs into tens of millions. They constitute the second most numerous ethnic group in modern Nigeria being gracefully productive especially around the Orlu - Mbaise axis of Igboland. The Igbo today, earlier understood themselves variously as distinct peoples (mba-namba) with known names even for those that are closely related to them. As such, there were the Izaa, Ikwo, Izi, Agbaja, Waawa, Nsukka, Nzam, Nri,

Awka, Anam, Nnewi, Orlu, Isu, Oma, Owerri, Ibeku, Ngwa, Ndoki, Aflkpo, Abriba, Enuani, Ukwuani, Aboh, Ika, Egbema, Ogwu, Ogbaru, Ozizo and Arc. Some of these folks have until today, maintained that they are not of the same categorization as the mainstream Igbo group e.g. Ukwuani (Kwale group). Some of such people identify themselves as Oru people. Some (e.g. Ikwerre, Etche, Ogba, Egi and Ekpeye) vehemently dissociate themselves from the Igbo and the Oru.

Interesting groupings have been made of the entire people to include the northern or Onitsha Igbo, the southern or Owerri Igbo, the western Igbo, the eastern or Cross River Igbo and the North - Eastern Igbo i.e. around Adani, Nsukka, Udi, Enugu, Eha-Amufu, and Abakaliki. (Forde and Jones, 1950), and the peoples are sometimes referred to using this grouping identity.

The Igbo practice patrilineality and so live in patrilineage sue called *Umunna* which are the extended family units of the society. In such units of household, can be found a man and his wife or wives, his children including his married sons and their own wives and children. This man is normally the leader of the entire *Umunna* which is comprised of the nuclear families *Obi*. The related *Umuma* in a given place would form the Igbo village known as *Ogbe*, of which the advanced ones would form a town called *Obodo*.

Igbo Origins

There exists more than one account on the question of Igbo origin. As such there are some categorizations of the viewpoints. The categorizations .can be classified into two: the external (outside Igbolandj beginning and immigrating into Igboland, and the autonomous (beginning from the very homeland where they are found today).

On the development, the outside Igboland and subsequent entrance into it, (that is pertaining £d the “orientalistic theory”) aroused more interest and controversy. One of the earliest proponents of this view was Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa the African who in 1789 published his biography entitled “The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano” and suggested that the Igbo were one of the lost Tribes’ of Israel citing such similarities as circumcision (Ibe-Ugwu) of especially man-child, women post-natal confinement and purification, naming of the children after specific occurrences and family/communal developments (such as Mgba-eke, Oguorie, Uzo - Onitsha, FEDECO, Okoroafor, Okoronkwo, Aso-ato, Mberekpe and Akuanyanugbo) as pointers to the seeming facts of history. Some persons followed on Olaudah Equiano’s steps and arrived finally at the Oriental

School of Thought. Some of the adherents of this view were G. I. Basen with the 'Levitical Code' (1972), M.D.W. Jeffreys with his publication of 1946, that provided us with a quazi Egyptian connection, H.R. Palmer, in the late 1920s, who claimed that the Igbo had Semitic blood and F.C. Ogbalu, who also viewed and linked (in 1979), the Igbo as having the 'Hebrew link'. Some more recent scholars have made similar mistakes and are variously seen as Diffusionists, Eurocentrists, Arabocentrists or Asiacentrists. The Eri/Nri/Umuleri traditions or accounts [See Jeffreys (1934); Henderson (1972); Onwuejeogwu (1972); Oguagha (1984) and Afigbo(1981)] is akin to this categorization.

For although evidence abound on the similarity of the settlement pattern and accounts on a common origin with the same ancestry for the Umueri clans/towns (see Jeffreys 1934), the actual date and place of emergence have not been provided. In the end, fingers point outside, to the north or east as the direction the people would have come from. This migratory pattern is also observed in the subsequent migrations and settlements of the Igbo people (across the Niger from the eastern to the western areas of the river).

The autochthonous claim by the Umueri group is not quite verifiable even with the Chameleon myth analysis provided by persons such as Onwuejeogwu. Such claims however, can be substantiated using the multi-disciplinary approach involving some archaeological, botanical, linguistic, entomological, ethnographic and advanced oral traditions analyses.

The foundation of Igbo origins can factually be better understood using the prehistoric/archaeological studies already carried out in and around Igboland. Of the excavations thus far, the earliest date with the most fascinating ancient artefacts came from Ugwuele Uturu site near Okigwe. This sealed stone factory site yielded a great number of stone tools with the dates ranging from the Acheulean to the Late Stone Age periods. That is a period covering from about one million years before the present time to at least some ten thousand years ago. These tools have common features with those found in the Nok area of Central Nigeria indicating the common ancestor of the Negroid people who have always operated around this part of Nigeria. By this time, the idea of the Igbo or any other ethnic group as we have now in the south-central and south-eastern Nigeria, was not there. Rather the 'Kwa' a sub-group of the 'Congo-Kordofania' was the identity (including the language) of the people. From this period (the beginning of the Holocene or 'Recent'), more rapid changes occurred which were observed in the language, style of working on materials and general adaptation. The Igbo

happened to be one of the splinter groups of 'kwa' that emerged, half - way through the Holocene epoch.

The Igbo inhabit the forest of the area and had evolved a unique manner of settlement pattern, which has characterized almost everything about them. This forest did not encourage closer association in the dwelling places, language and such other cultural attributes. They were however, not in complete isolation and had retained most of the ways by which they lived their daily life. From the available archaeological and ethnographic evidence, they had continued to adapt, leveraging on the previous achievements and had at some instances made breakthroughs in domestication (therefore, being among the beginners in the process of food production in the entire world). From such prehistoric sites as Eziukwu Ukpa, Umundu, Opi (near Nsukka) Lejja, Igbo-Ukwu, and Oguta, information about how the transition from this remote development of the cultural activities among Igbo people have been understood.

This is more so as the deeper the stratigraphy and the age of course, the clearer the accounts. The Late Stone Age period in (Igboland) soon gave way to the Neolithic period being the last of the Stone Age period, the interface period between it and the Metal Age and the astriding ceramic. The consistency in style of fabrication of the wares in stones, ceramics and the metals are visible, attesting to the fact that the same people were responsible for them over the ages.

It is from such artefacts that one can extrapolate the information about the Igbo and perhaps the nation that has been there from time immemorial. The shapes of the tools, for instance, the pots have remained basically the same from the hemispherical (globular) to semi-hemispherical. The techniques of firing and the decorative motifs have also remained relatively the same with only slight innovations. There is little or no doubt therefore, that the people have been in this home land for a very long time if not since the very beginning.

The Igbo are among the core Negroid population groups that first inhabited the earth just around the Nok culture zone to the boundary between Nigeria and Cameroon. They had also been part of the migratory groups somewhat pictured in the 'Bantu' migration or dispersal. They perhaps had originally lived north-eastwards of their present home land to the semi-Savanna area just under lake Chad to the stretch of land on the Adamawa axis and had moved a little deeper to the forest area of West Africa where they are found

today. This could have been necessitated by the depletion of food resources in the former place of abode or stiff social challenges such as disputes and conflicts. There is no doubt that the people were already in the present home land by the time they crossed into the metal age threshold. It also appears to be their independent discovery as the new technological base. For by the 9th century AD at Igbo-Ukwu they had mastered the act of working on especially the Bronze (including copper and its alloys) than anyone else around them.

In sum, on the Igbo origins, one can say that there are facts undeniable in the data and associated information generated from the investigations thus far. The first is that the people are of the Negroid stock. So, they are living where the Negroid are known to have evolved in south central Africa. The language they speak is also a testimony of the position, that they have not moved far away from where they originated with their other kinsmen (other members of that language family i.e. Kwa of Congo-Kordofania). The linguists informed us that the different members of the Kwa group split into various languages such as Igboid, Hausoid, Yoruboid, and Ijoid about 5,000 years ago [see Armstrong (1964), Andah and Okpoko (1987)]. Also, that they have been for a long time forest dwellers who have domesticated certain food resources of which no other people have been able to do exactly.

The Challenges and Prospects of a New Dawn in Igboland

That the Igbo are a great people is unquestionable. There is no account of the conquering of the entire people by the previous powerful kingdoms or empires noticed around this part of Africa. They had remained resilient until the coming of the Europeans and the evil use of the gunboat diplomacy and other forms of coercion and manipulations in the 19th century. Upon this, evidence abound on the tenacity of the people, their adaptability (willingness to change for the better), industriousness, vigour and general resourcefulness.

When in the mid-19th century; the quintessential Michael Crowder applied seeking to have the granting and sponsoring of the establishment of a Christian mission on the Niger, with Onitsha as its headquarter from the CMS in London and his request was granted, he was mandated to prepare Igboland for God's mission. Crowder carried out this assignment with zeal and with the help of his junior in the Lord's vineyard, named Simon Jonas, published the first book in Igbo in 1857 called "Isoama - Ibo Premier" later to be known as "Azu Ndu" (green back), and began the transformation process

necessary in the reformation of the people and the country at large. The Igbo began to get on in the work of Christianization of Igboland and the general acculturation, following the advanced western civilization. Many families were enthused by this development because of the rewards it brought to them. This among other things created the seed-bed on which people lived and thrived. From the elites to the artisans, people were caught-up in the new development of which they also benefited. Igboland from thence on began to get transformed. Some of these people at the on-set contributed to making the people understand the globalized world in which we were entering into. People's characters were being focus in the right direction. The people's value system received a lot of boost. Shortly after, the persons trained in these ways became the agents of positive change in their various places (villages and towns) on issues of life. At one point, the Europeans and other sort of trainees began to live together with the people.

These peoples from Igbo-land who took over from the colonial government officials became the role models of the land and beyond. The incidence of apprenticeship became well enshrined in our society. There was love for family and mother land. The old ideas began to be fused with the new ones where they are compatible. The outcome of such interlacing became eye-openers on what we can achieve by proper inclusion and better placed world-view of the people. The old aged-up more gracefully and the young had greater expectation. Good achievements were celebrated and the persons involved served as models for aspiring persons in all fields of endeavour. A down-to-earth life of good work, honesty, perseverance, honour, dignity and wisdom was advocated for and followed. Bad aspects of behaviour were frowned at and sometimes outrightly condemned.

From about the middle of the 20th century, the situation changed. People began to be negatively influenced by circumstances around them. They began to challenge the prevalent order of things within their localities on the backdrop of the happenings around them. Gradually, things turned from green to amber and from that to red. One proverbial finger had touched the oil and began to spread it to the rest. In a short time the negative ways took over as the normal ways of life among the people. The outcome became pain, worries and frustration, a misnomer. This is the way we have carried on into the new millennium and we are on the edge. Economic gains can be noticed in some quarters but this is not good enough. The general good of all is desired. The people of peace and spirituality should accompany economic fortunes.

Ndi-Igbo should have a rethink on how to build a better world for ourselves. The diplomatic relationship with others notwithstanding, there should be proper grafting of the right values of life for the people as we proceed in the new millennium. As a little boy, I still recall the voices of some of the hero's of the immediate Igbo past such as those of Brothers Mahakwe Ike on the local radio always beginning or ending presentations with the sentence "*Ndi-Igbo m huru n'anya onye rituere nu nyetu nwanne ya*" (advising those who have, to share with their own) and Onyewuchi Onyeikegbulam similarly saying "*Igbo wu Igbo unu emela nwuchu*" (praying for long life of the people). The love for one another should be the key in our relationship as one family. The reworking, from the rethinking should be from the perspective of the philosophy of live and let us live; living for one another. The people's hands should be jointly fixed in operation in our life activities. In this way we will not just stand but will move and succeed exceedingly well.

Conclusion

Good neighbourliness should be our major concern. Our leaders have a good role to play to ensure that we live in peace and love, which will make way for progress. The followers should be lawful, observe good conduct always and live meaningfully well. This is the way forward for Ndi-Igbo in the new millennium. I call on all (Government/at all levels, everybody-men and women of all works of life, youths, children, civil societies, NGOs, public and private establishments economic, religious, social, etc.), to rise up and be counted.

We already have something to leverage on (the potentials of our agriculture, the innate ability to learn, innovate and invent). The old ways of living for good should be advocated; for good begets good and when maintained will lead to excellence in all ramifications.

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