

# The Nigerian Field

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In this Issue:

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## ASPECTS OF ART, HIERARCHY AND HEGEMONY IN THE IGBO WORLDVIEW

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In spite of the various references to the Igbo in books on African, trade politics and history, in spite of their size as a large ethnic group, the Igbo are among the least studied of any African people of their size.<sup>1</sup> In such a situation, speculations and extrapolations in theory, history and culture are bound to arise until correlations are derived from other studies and other sources. In this paper, therefore, references will be made to works of literature as well as to artifacts in order to illustrate salient aspects of hierarchy and hegemony in Igbo culture and worldview.

What is said of the Igbo in the preceding paragraph is equally true of most societies without a literate culture until the imposition of European rule. The situation is even more acute in the case of the Igbo because they were not placed strategically on the routes traversed by early Arab and European voyagers and historians. The result is that much of the early life and traditions of the Igbos before 1900 were undocumented. Another seeming disadvantage is that the Igbos did not evolve centralized institutions like the empires of Benin and Oyo where epics and oral traditions developed as part of the state apparatus.<sup>2</sup> It is therefore necessary to rely on a variety of facts from art, archaeology, folk-tales and recent literature, but in particular on the Nri phenomenon and Igbo-Ukwu artifacts.

One generally accepted view is that the Igbo live under a decentralised political structure which guarantees egalitarianism. More recently, however, M.A. Onwuejeogwu, one of the foremost scholars on Igbo tradition and culture, has modified this view. He described an Igbo hegemony that existed under the King of Nri since c948 A.D. This system of kingship ritualised the process of governance and the economy. It was said to have wielded tremendous influence over most of Igbo land:

The concept of peace, harmony and truth was ritually symbolized and enacted in the ceremonies of the *Ozo* titled men, who were also political elite. Nri men who had taken the *Ichi* title always carried in their hands the spear of peace called *otonsi*. With the spear of peace in their hands and *ichi* marks on their faces they were identified as the "sons" of *Nze Nri*, *Nwa Nri*, who controlled the mystical force. They travelled generally unmolested from one Igbo settlement to another as agents of *Eze Nri* to perform political and ritual functions associ-

ated with the removing of abomination, the dissolving of the codes of abomination and the enacting of new codes, the ordaining of ritual and political officials, the crowning of chiefs, the making of peace and the creating of markets and shrines. In the performance of these activities Nri people spread into different parts of Igbo land and Eze Nri held some degrees of control over the external and internal politics of older Igbo settlements.<sup>3</sup>

In a similar context, Onwuejeogwu argues that the Igbo are unified by linguistic, social, political, economic, ritual and cultural factors. In analysing the Igbo worldview, he divides the universe into four main sections *Uwa*, *Mmuo*, *Alusi* and *Okike*.<sup>4</sup> *Uwa* is the concept of the physical world and is occupied by human beings, animals and forests. *Mmuo* are the dead ancestors or forefathers who founded the subsisting lineages. The illustrious ancestors or canonized fathers are *Ndi-ichie* while the ignoble, unsuccessful ones become mischievous spirits - *Akalogoli*, or *Ekwensu* or *Ajo Mmuo*. *Alusi* are demons or nature spirits. They consist of such sub-groups as earth spirits, sky spirits, elementals, river forces (*Idemili*), yam force (*Ifejioku*) the divination force (*Agwu*) etc. *Okike* or *Chukwu* or *Chineke* is the creator force and manifests as the fertility spirit *Agbala*, as the author of life and knowledge, *Anyanwu*, the procreator force *Chi* etc.

The concept of individualism, dynamism and egalitarianism is deeply connected to two concepts: the *Ikenga*, otherwise called the cult of the right hand and the *chi* or guardian angel. *Chi* is a root word derived from *Chi-Ukwu* or *Chukwu*. In other words one's *chi* is one's destiny or procreative and driving spirit. Whilst the *chi* is a spiritual concept, there is a tangible counterpart in the *ikenga*, a wooden image usually held in one's right hand. It symbolises a man's talent, drive and achievements. It is the summation of one's individual effort. As a physical image, the *ikenga* exhibits a young, healthy man standing or sitting with two ram-like horns projecting from his head. He holds up a sword or knife in his right hand, and in his left hand, a skull. The image is interpreted thus on the wall of the Odinani Museum at Nri:

The two ram horns mean that the person must go ahead into his business with the stubbornness of a ram. The knife in his right hand means that he must cut down any obstacles on the way and the skull in the left hand means that he must always take the lead in order to succeed.

A major illuminating difference seems to exist between Yoruba and Igbo philosophy. Whilst the Igbo conceive of their world in two broad spiritual categories of the sky of *Chukwu* and the earth of *Ala* and believe in immanent ancestors who influence the world here and now, they

tend to exhibit a worldview that is synchronic. On the other hand, the Yoruba exhibit a world that consists of the past, the present, the future and a fourth nebulous phase which is similar to the ancestral and divination force (*Agwu*) among the Igbo. The worldview of the Yoruba, though essentially cyclical, tends in this way, to be diachronic. Whether these different outlooks on life and existence are exhibited in personalities is a matter for a different structural, anthropological study.

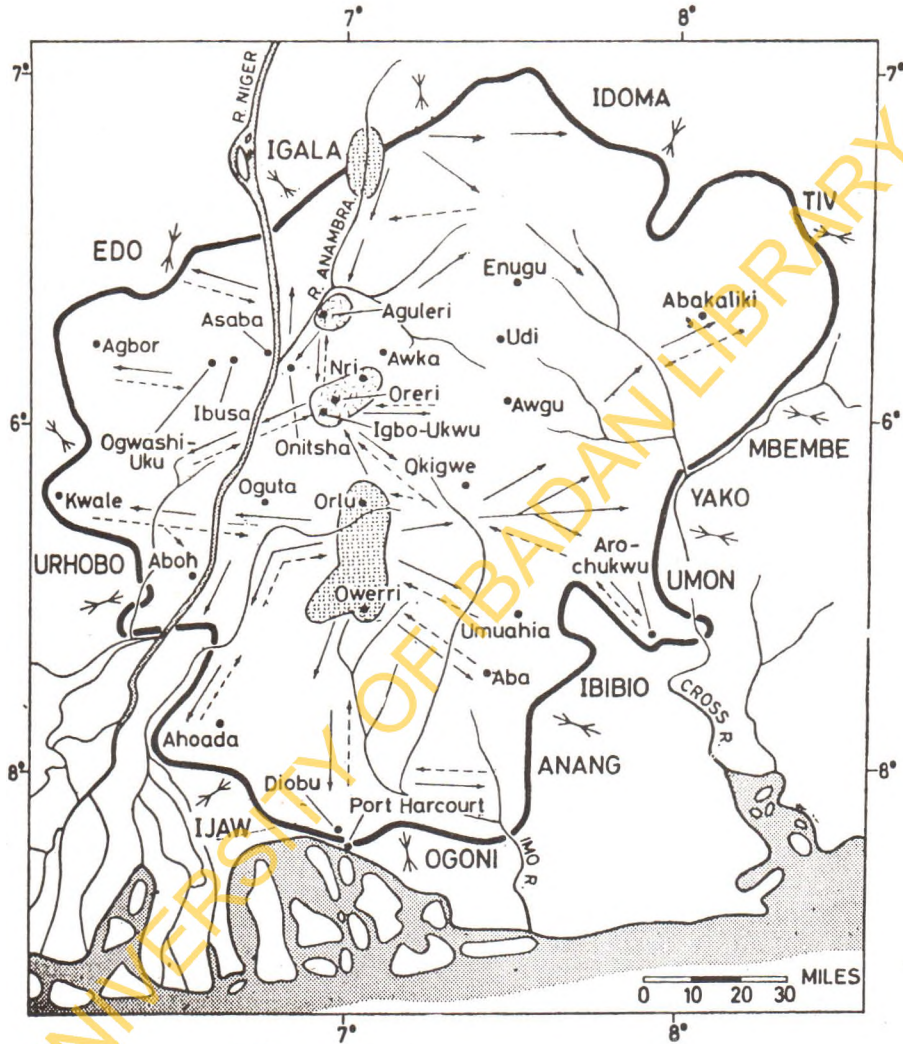
The importance of the superstructure of the worldview articulated above is that it enables us to place in context the material artifacts excavated at Igbo-Ukwu which link the geographical zones of Nri and the areas around the Anambra valley where so much migration and artistic civilization have occurred. The Northern Igbo of Nri, Akwa and Igbo-Ukwu have a highly developed title system culminating in the *Eze* or *Ozo* as well as an elaborate genealogy chart stretching back to ten generations. Consequently, they have also developed a noteworthy ancestor temple system *Obu system*. The various migrations and social contacts between Northern and Southern Igbo are recorded in the oral traditions of Nri. Such rich traditions have now formed the basis of historical speculation. One of such traditions believed that an early civilization developed around the upper valley of the Anambra river and that there was a westward movement towards the Igala settlements around the upper lower Niger basin. Other migrants moved southwards and settled at Aguleri, Nri and Oreri (see map). Both migrations not only led to the development of dynastic cultures but also gave rise to artistic flourishes as evidenced by the Igbo-Ukwu bronze and pottery objects. Radiocarbon dating places the Igbo-Ukwu finds in the 9th century A.D.<sup>5</sup>






Other oral traditions of the area recollect that it was the long periods of famine in the area that led to the ritualisation of their economic crops, largely yam, cocoyam and palm produce. In effect, a ritual cult was simultaneously established to take care of the *Ozo* title system under the control of *Eze Nri*, (the king of Nri).<sup>6</sup>

The artworks of Igbo-Ukwu are so dainty and so ornate that they could only have been created by artists who lived in settled communities with a highly evolved social and political system. William Bascom and Ossie Enekwe have also speculated that the diversity of styles exhibited in Igbo art arises from the concept of Igbo individualism and that such a proliferation of styles is not likely to be found elsewhere. This assertion may only be true to some extent because the same proliferation in styles could be due to the lack of a central, unifying artistic tradition or the lack of an established state system.<sup>7</sup>

It has been previously stated that the Igbo conceive of their world in two broad spiritual categories. This has ramified itself into a

### PATTERNS OF MIGRATIONS IN THE IGBO CULTURE AREA



-  Primary core
-  Secondary core
-  Contact with other cultures
-  Original thrust before AD 1500
-  Backward thrust between AD 1500 and the present date

deeply philosophical construct in Igbo philosophy. A prominent African writer, and an Igbo by birth, has discussed through the concept of *chi* in Igbo cosmology, the central place of the notion of duality in Igbo thought: "Wherever something stands, something else will stand beside it. Nothing is absolute"<sup>8</sup>. The concept of the *chi* as that which establishes a confrère for man or his spirit in this world is illustrated by two traditions among the Igbo themselves:

... among the Igbo of Akwa a man who has arrived at the point in his life when he needs to set up a shrine to his *chi* will invite a priest to perform a ritual of bringing down the spirit from the face of the sun at daybreak. Thereafter, it is represented physically in the man's compound until the day of his death when the shrine must be destroyed.<sup>9</sup>

The Igbo, in espousing stability, tend to represent events as necessarily paired. Even the abode of the dead is considered a functional twin to the world of the living. Quoting A.C. Leonard to substantiate this point, Achebe repeats the words of an Igbo informant:

... We Ibo look forward to the next world as being much the same as this... We picture life there to be exactly as it is in this world. The ground there is just the same as it is here, the earth is similar. There are forests and hills and valleys with rivers flowing and roads leading from one town to another... People in spirit land have their ordinary occupations, the farmer his farm.<sup>10</sup>

It is in pursuance of the same phenomenon that Achebe uses the world of the ancestors in the physical appearance of *egwugwu* spirits to adjudicate matters of law and justice among a people who do not believe in absolutes.<sup>11</sup> The representation of each clan by its own physicalised ancestor who can reappear and hold dialogue with the living, is a reassurance that democracy as a concept is inherent in pairing phenomena. Once an event has a like, it begets like, and this echoes the principle of homeopathy. The same concept of duality, or pairing, which esteems democracy also underscores hegemony in Igbo culture. The classic example comes from Achebe's description of the career of the great priest of Ulu, *Ezeulu*.

The calibre of respect accorded the priest of Ulu is similar to that granted to an *Eze-Nri*. *Ezeulu* stands between the men of Umuaro and their pantheon. He carries himself with much dignity, and prides himself on his ability to foresee natural disasters. He calls his subjects and acts as mediator between men and their ancestors or their gods. For the same reason, he keeps a record of the seasons and watches out for the phases of the moon. He beats the drums to announce the time for harvest as well as the time for the eating of the new yam. No man could claim to be as great as *Ezeulu* in that context. On one occasion, however, his enormous powers became his own undoing. He had disobeyed a friendly call

from the colonial officer, Captain Winterbottom, and humiliated Winterbottom's messengers. Those messengers went back to the provincial capital and probably narrated a biased story. The great priest of Ulu had to be arrested. He felt utterly humiliated and after a long sojourn away from his base, he returned to vent his anger on his town's men. The moon had rolled by without his usual ceremonial reckoning on the traditional calendar. He therefore insisted on reckoning the seasons artificially from the point of his return home.

The consequence was that some months were delayed and people were not allowed to harvest their crops. All appeals to *Ezeulu* to announce the harvest failed, and people were on the verge of starvation. *Ezeulu* forgot that, among his Igbo kith and kin, no matter how powerful a man is, he cannot win against the clan. He refused to countenance the rule established by Chukwu at the beginning of time that even a god must hold discussions with his subjects and heed their yearnings. Hegemony must be on a foundation of shared power. After the delayed harvest, the community abandoned *Ezeulu* and rendered his cult of personality void. *Ezeulu* thereby lost his constituency and, in addition, incurred a broken mind.<sup>12</sup>

The phenomenon mentioned above is reflected in the vision of things in Igbo art. Even the representation of gods among the Igbo is subjected to human consciousness, evaluation and mood. Eneke writes that "just as Igbo metaphysics is man-centred, Igbo art tends to focus on humans as dominant artistic subjects." It is this inclination in Igbo<sup>13</sup> art and society which regulates the relationship of man to the cosmos. No hegemonic power allows an Igbo man to attain the status of a god as

*Ezeulu* attempted in the example cited above. No Igbo man can attain apotheosis like Yoruba chiefs such as Sango and Ogun and even a god can be humbled by his devotees. Eneke sums up the situation thus:

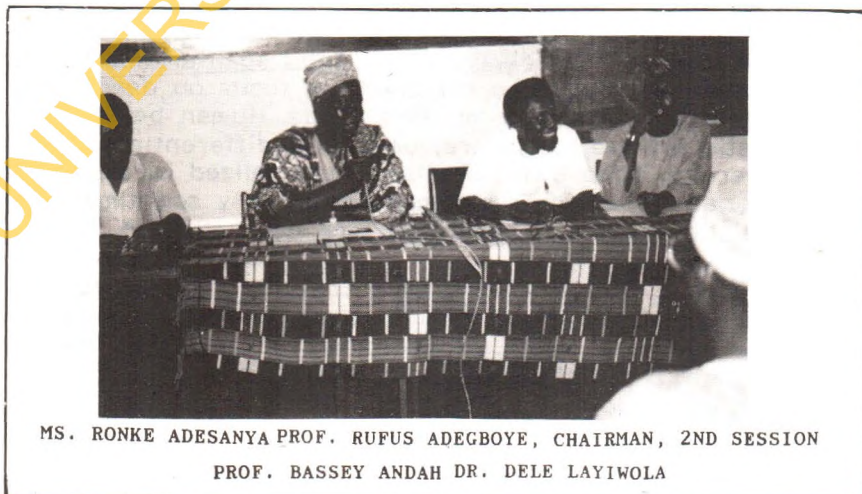
It appears that the Igbo are averse to the concept of heroism or any cult of personality that may threaten their individual liberty. This derives from Igbo egalitarianism to which I have referred. Igbo art seems to focus on deeds, not on individuals who perform such deeds. Human beings in Igbo plastic art are, therefore, usually undifferentiated. Generally, Igbo Ukwu craftsmen specialized in duplicating the natural world "sometimes realistically sometimes with a realistic shape but ornate surface decoration".<sup>14</sup>

The above goes a long way to explain that the Igbo Ukwu finds which we are today celebrating will not do much in the unravelling of Igbo history in the sense in which anthropomorphic arts do. Their antiquity is undisputed but the history of their origins may only be revealed by a generation further down the line than ours.



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