

## IGBO HISTORY SINCE K.O. DIKE: STATUS, PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS<sup>1</sup>

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I was asked to speak on 'Southeast Nigeria in Historical Perspective'. I suspect the area involved is the Southeast geo-political zone. But Igboland includes nine local government areas in Delta State and the whole of Ikwerreland in Rivers State. I think we can conveniently ignore the political and ethnic twist which our kith and kin in Ikwerreland have tended to assume since the end of the civil war. I have therefore decided to look at the picture beyond the southeast geo-political zone.

For the history of our area of enquiry, we can glean some useful historical information from the works of missionaries, political officers and anthropologists written early in the 20th century or earlier. These include G.T. Basden, A.J. Fox, A.G. Leonard, C.K. Meek, P.A. Talbot, N.W. Thomas, Forde and G.I. Jones, M.M. Green, M.D.W. Jeffreys, S. Leith-Ross, among others. We have also copious reports by missionaries and political officers in the Public Record Office, London, C.M.S. Papers, Birmingham, England as well as in Lisbon and Rome. These are not records by trained historians but we can gauge invaluable material from the papers.

Of far-reaching importance to the historian is Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa the African*. This is an account of an ex-Igbo slave who was kidnapped with his sister in 1740 when he was about 9 or 10 years. The book was published in England when he was forty years of age. It provides unusual insight into the Igbo society of his day, including trade and commerce, currency in circulation, agriculture, sports and recreational activities. These records listed above and more, were not put together by trained historians but they have immensely helped to enhance our reconstruction of Igbo history for the period before the British invasion of Igboland.

However, I have decided to take Professor Dike's great pioneering effort as a starting point because of the possibilities Dike's study and promptings manifested. In 1950, he submitted a PhD thesis on trade and politics in the Niger Delta to the University of London. It was later published by the Oxford University Press in 1956. The work touched on the Aro whom he described, perhaps with some exaggeration, as 'the economic dictators of the hinterland' and the Awka people as itinerant smiths. He also drew attention to the 'land hunger' which led the Igbo to migrate to other parts of Nigeria which were better endowed in terms of land expanse and opportunities in order to eke out a living. He did not only use the abundant documentary evidence available then in Europe, but he conducted oral interviews in Nigeria to support his thesis.

Perhaps we should provide a brief insight into this man for those who do not know him. He was born in Awka in present Anambra State on 17 December 1917 and attended the famous Dennis Memorial Grammar School, Onitsha before proceeding first to Achimota College, Ghana (then Gold Coast), later to Fourah Bay College (a branch of the University of Durham in the United Kingdom)

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<sup>1</sup>Being a Keynote Address at the First Southeast Nigeria History Summit held at the Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki on 12 September 2011.

for the first degree and the University of Aberdeen, Scotland, for the Masters in history. Thereafter, he went to the University of London for the PhD degree which he earned in 1950. He returned to Nigeria to take up an academic position at the University College, Ibadan (then a branch of the University of London) to teach African history. But conditions were not yet right for this, as there were no courses in African history at the time. He left two years later to join the West African (now Nigerian) Institute for Social and Economic Research. He returned to the History Department at Ibadan in 1954 and became Professor and Head of Department in 1956. He subsequently embarked on recruitment of new staff to help him in the transformation of the history curriculum and the establishment of the Ibadan School of History which produced the eminent Igbo scholar, Prof. A.E. Afigbo.

Prof. Dike was appointed the first African Principal of the University College in 1960 and when Ibadan became a full-fledged university in 1962, he was its first indigenous Vice-Chancellor, a position he held until the Nigerian crisis. During these years, he got the federal government to establish the National Archives and National Museums and Monuments for the preservation of Nigerian history and culture. Among his many other accomplishments were the establishment of the Centre for Arabic Documentation, Institute of African Studies and the Benin Historical Scheme. During the Nigerian civil war, he was appointed the Vice-Chancellor of the Biafran University of Science and Technology, based in Port Harcourt. But he was much of the time a Biafran diplomat abroad. After the war, he joined the Harvard University to invigorate its African Studies Programme. In 1980, the then Anambra State Government (comprising present Anambra, Enugu and Ebonyi States) had the foresight of appointing him President of the Anambra University of Science and Technology. He held this position until his untimely death on 26 October 1983.

Prof. Dike was honoured by leading universities in the world. At his graveside, Prof. Ifemesia described him as the 'History-King', 'Superman of Learning', while Prof. Ade Ajayi, two years later, described him as 'a pioneer in modern African historiography'. Prof. A.O. Nwauwa, an Igbo academic at the Bowling Green State University, Ohio in a paper presented at African Studies Conference in Nashville, Tennessee (2001) summarized Dike's contribution as follows:

Nationalist movements and eventual independence were accompanied by the emergence of a new intellectual tradition in which Professor Kenneth Onwuka Dike was in the forefront. Scholarly revolution was most evident in the field of African studies, especially in the areas of African historical thought, African historical methods and African historical consciousness. Dike was a leading figure in this movement whereby scholars (including some Europeans and Americans) began the creation of scholarly, academic, well researched professional historical writing about Africa in the years after World War II. Consequently, this effort gave rise to modern African historiography. The emergent historiography liberated not only the method, content and scope of the study of African histories, cultures and societies but it also forced a world-wide recognition of the intellectual contributions of Africans and peoples of African descent. Dike was an intellectual nationalist and was thrust in the center-stage of this great movement.

Thus, Prof. Dike was a pathfinder in African historiography, the tool and stimulus for the recovery and reconstruction of Igbo history. Following the stage he set at Ibadan were C.C. Ifemesia

and J.C. Anene who also made their contributions to our understanding of Igbo history, although their PhD theses were not on Igbo history. Anene's early death cut short his efforts in this direction. Ifemesia's *Traditional Humane Living Among the Igbo* is a book of Igbo history, culture and philosophy. Our own Professor S.C. Ukpabi here, a well-known military historian, has stimulating articles on Nsukka before colonial rule and on Igbo warfare. His papers have widely attracted the attention of students of Igbo history.

We have earlier referred to Prof. Afigbo, the first Ibadan PhD. He submitted his thesis in November 1964 on 'Indirect Rule in Southeastern Nigeria' which was later published in 1972 with the title, *The Warrant Chiefs in Southeastern Nigeria* and he thereafter devoted his energies and intellect to extend the frontiers of Igbo history. His work on the warrant chief system exposed him to the true nature of Igbo society. Numbered among those who have striven to deepen our knowledge during the period is S.N. Nwagbara, who did a PhD at the Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois 1965, on 'Iboland: A Study of British Penetration and Problem of Administration, 1860-1930'. In 1977, while at Nsukka, he expanded and published it with the title, *Iboland: A Century of Contact with Britain, 1860-1960*. Felix Ekechi worked on Missionary Enterprise and Rivalry in Iboland, 1857-1914 (1972) while Walter Ahanotu examined the relationship between religion and economy in Igbo society, 1971. Kingsley Nwachukwu Ogedemgbe submitted his PhD on the 'Aboh Kingdom of the Lower Niger, c.1850-1900' to the University of Wisconsin in 1971. G.I. Nwaka submitted his Urban History of Eastern Nigeria to Dalhousie University of Nova Scotia, Canada in 1975. A lot of space and papers have been committed by him to urban history of Aba and some other Igbo towns.

I studied the Socio-economic trends in West Niger Iboland with the title 'The History of the Edo/Igbo Borderland before 1897' submitted to the Centre of West African Studies, University of Birmingham, 1978. I should mention here that Prof. J.D. Fage, my supervisor, a leading Africanist in Europe at the time, wanted me to work on Aro, my people, but Prof. K.O. Dike and Felicia I. Ekejiuba said they were already working on a 2-volume study on the Aro. I thought and I was also advised that it would be better to see the outcome of that study before I could decide if it was still needful to fill the gaps. Unfortunately, the two volumes did not really see the light of day, apparently because Prof. Dike was too busy at Harvard or was getting fatigued by the strains and stresses of administration and the civil war. Eventually, a book, *The Aro of Southeastern Nigeria, 1750-1900*, bearing the names of K.O. Dike and F.I. Ekejiuba was published by University Press, Ibadan, 1992. Actually, it was Ekejiuba's work and has a lot of useful material on the Aro but falls very short as a book. The book has attracted considerable adverse comments and reviews by top scholars. But she can easily be pardoned because of her academic background. Her first degree was in Geography while her PhD on the Aro was on economic anthropology. Let me say here, beyond my primary area of study, I have published a number of books and articles since 1986 on the Aro, including *Arochukwu History and Culture* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension, 1986) and four volumes of *Building on the Debris of a Great Past*.

I.A. Nwaboghuogu studied Dynamics of Change in Eastern Nigeria, Dalhousie, 1981. Much of this is situated in Iboland. John Oriji, a historian now resident in the US, worked on Ngwaland, his natal home. Other Igbo historians who have taken up case studies include P.A. Oguagha, 'Igbo/Igala relations up to 1900', University of Ibadan, PhD, 1983; O.N. Njoku, an economic historian, studied Igbo iron technology, Dalhousie University, Canada, PhD, 1986. The distinguished scholar, Don Ohadike, now late, looked at West Niger Igbo colonial history; U.D. Anyanwu studied

local government administration, University of Ibadan, 1984; UgochukwuNwokeji studied the Aro slave trade at the University of Toronto (1999). Ezenyem worked on social and traditional institutions in Old Onitsha Province, University of Benin. At Nsukka, we have tried to pay our dues regarding Igbo history. Among our many former PhD students are those who have been encouraged to work on different aspects of Igbo history. Professor U.C. Anyanwu worked on the Ezza, PhD, (1993); Drs. OkechukwuOkeke (2003) and Ego Odukwe (2005) on Onitsha political and cultural history; Dr. Emmanuel Emeghara on Anambra/Imo River Basin Authority (2006). Dr. U.O.A. Esse on Igbo transport enterprise (2005); Professors Gloria Chukwu (1995) (now in the US) and NgoziOjiakor (2006) as well as Dr. EgodiUchendu on economic, political and social aspects of gender history. Dr. Jonas Eze (2009) on Church and Politics in Igboland; Dr. C.G.Eze on Nsukka social and political history (2010); Dr. J.C. Chukwu (2010) on mining in Ebonyi State; Dr. D.I. Ajaegbo on the sprawling commercial city of Nnewi (2011), among others. Two or three more are likely to complete their studies before the end of the year. I am personally proud to have been associated in all these as either the supervisor or the second reader/internal examiner. Thus, I read all these theses in the writing stages and made my contribution towards their outcome. Some of these have, in fact, been published. My long time colleague and friend, Prof. O.N. Njoku, has closely cooperated with me in this enterprise.

Outside Nsukka, Prof. Raymond Amadi worked on Nnewi; Dr. C.O. Mgbada on Abakaliki; Dr. Dan Chukwu on banking in Eastern Nigeria which invariably included Igboland; Dr. E.N. Ota on comparative analysis of Igbo and Ibibio state unions (1995) and Dr. E.N. Mbakwe on socio-economic study of Mbaise, 1500-1900 (2004). The five are products of the University of Calabar. Dr. ChidiOsugwu worked on the Bende and their neighbours (University of Uyo, PhD, 2010); Dr. Igwe, Igbo economic history (agriculture), University of Lagos. Chima J. Korieh worked on the State and the Peasantry: Agricultural Transformations and Sustainability in Eastern Nigeria, 1900-1970 (PhD University of Toronto, 2013). From his studies, he has published works on the Igbo, including the stimulating, *The Land Has Changed: History, Society and Gender in Colonial Eastern Nigeria* (University of Calgary Press, 2010). I cannot claim to have an exhaustive list since I do not really have details of some young Igbo scholars.

Of interest to the historian are the works of a New Zealander, Professor Elizabeth Isichei, who married an Igbo medical doctor and academic. These works include: *The Igbo People and the Europeans: The Genesis of a Relationship – to 1906*, London 1973; *A History of the Igbo People*, London, 1976; *Igbo Worlds*, London, 1977. J.U.J. Asiegbu's *Umuahia People and their Neighbours* (1988) is also a useful addition to our study of Igbo history. In 1992, a few copies of the *Groundwork of Igbo History*, in which many of us contributed chapters and was edited by Prof. Afigbo, came out. Curiously, more copies were not produced for the market and even for contributors. There are scores of books and pamphlets by local historians as well as first degree and masters degree projects dealing with various aspects of Igbo history in the universities and other tertiary institutions that can be explored and utilized. What is important here is careful sifting and weighing of the evidence.

During the period under review, the archaeological studies and greatly enriching volumes and publications of Professor Thurstan Shaw, D.D. Hartle, V.E. Chikwendu, F.N. Anozie, I.A. Okpoko and P. Okpoko have enormously helped in interpreting and re-interpreting Igbo history. Of interest, too, is the work of an anthropologist, Prof. M.A. Onwuejeogwu *An Igbo Civilization: Nri Kingdom*

and Hegemony (Ethiope, 1981). V.C. Uchendu's *The Igbo of South East Nigeria* (1965) is also useful to the historian.

What we have been trying to do so far is to show the strides taken in the last half a century in trying to recover different aspects of Igbo history following the footprints of Dike. D.H. Jones of the school of African and Oriental Studies, London had observed in 1976 that Igbo history was 'a neglected and very intractable area of inquiry'. A year earlier Prof. Afigbo lamented that very little had been done in the area of what he called the 'essential history' of the Igbo, that is, Igbo history before the British intervention. Luckily, Afigbo had cause to modify this assertion in his *Idea of Igbo History* (Uturu, 1989) and profusely acknowledged what some of us have been trying to do.

So much has been written in this country and outside on the Nigerian civil war in which Igboland east and west of the Niger was the main theatre. There is a lot of room for further enquiries. Some of you may have had the opportunity of watching and listening to the commentaries of a 13-episode documentary on the civil war. Prof. Ukpabi, Prof. Soglo, then of the University of Abuja, the late fiery ABU Professor BalaUsman and my humble self had acted as consultants to the NTA in assembling the facts and putting together the documentary. I had a running battle with BalaUsman in Abuja because we had conflicting views over the cause of the war. But efforts were made to interview the major actors still alive at the time on the Biafran side, including Ojukwu, Effiong, Achuzia, Madiebo and lots of others. If in places it was slanted in favour of the Nigerian side, it must be remembered that Obasanjo was in power at the time and the project was funded by the Federal Government. In fact, NTA needed N100 million to shoot it and had only received N10 million.

The study and writing of Igbo history certainly have been beset with difficulties which have reduced the pace and volume of work done. As has been emphasized over and over again, far more progress has been made in other major ethnic groups such as the Hausa/Fulani, Yoruba, Edo and Igala, among others. It may be recalled that Islam had been known in Northern Nigeria between the 9th and 4th centuries. Islam thus conferred a degree of literacy in Arabic among the people early enough. In addition, Muslim clerics and scholars who visited important cities in ancient Kanem/Borno and Hausaland have bequeathed to us invaluable information on the people's social and economic life. In the area of the Niger Benue confluence where kingdoms such as Igala, Nupe and Jukun had emerged, there were kings and court historians who have left us with historical information that can be pieced together for the reconstruction of the people's past. Similarly, the kingdom of Oyo had contact with Islam. Again the Yoruba and the Edo had much earlier contact with the Europeans. Furthermore, Oyo palace had *Arokin*; Benin had *Esekhure* as the court historians. The city states of the Niger Delta also had relatively early contact with European traders. Thus, early in the 20th century, European writers found these areas attractive in weaving some form of history. There were dates and landmarks which historians relished in these states and kingdoms.

The Igbo first generation of academic historians, Dike, Anene, Ifemesia and others, have been unfairly criticized in some quarters for not doing enough for Igbo history. They were brought up between 1950 and 1964 in Britain in the best traditions of Western conventional notion of historical scholarship. They had to support their theses with dates as pivots for their studies. Perhaps, it may be argued that Dike, in setting up the Yoruba and Benin Historical Schemes, should have done the same for the Igbo. But he needed to start somewhere and besides, there were white lecturers, apart from the indigenous ones, who were interested in supporting those two schemes. In the North, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria in collaboration with the state governments established Arewa House for

assembling historical materials pertaining to the area. Prof. Abdullahi Smith, a Briton, with a profound knowledge of Hausa and Arabic, was its first director. Arewa House has continued to be active.

Down here, we have not been so lucky. There was a Southeastern History Project established at the University of Nigeria immediately after the war. Grants were made available to academics for research. Because the grants and the scheme were not properly managed and there was the occasional personality clash in History Department, the project collapsed. The different state governments in the Igbo-speaking area and well-to-do individuals have shown little interest, if any, in the study of Igbo history and culture. Not much has happened to the Institute of African Studies at Nsukka in terms of viable grants to prosecute history projects. In 1989, the Imo State University, now Abia State University, took a bold step in setting up a Centre for Igbo Studies. Twenty two years after the establishment of the Centre, there is hardly anything to show for it. Recently, I understand, another one was set up by the Imo State University, Owerri, under the directorship of our own man, Prof. U.D. Anyanwu. In fact, he phoned me once to say he would require my assistance and I readily agreed to oblige. Let's hope this will be up and doing and that the University, the state government and the Igbo elite will provide the necessary tools for the Centre to function effectively.

The ambivalent attitude of the Federal Government over the study of history in our school system has not given any stimulus for those wanting to study the subject and thus help to promote Igbo history. Many departments of history in this country have had to combine diplomacy, strategic studies or international relations to survive because of declining interest in history. And yet I do not know any graduate of the applied or physical sciences in Britain or the US that does not know the history of the country. Professor Dike himself had warned that 'for young and emergent nations there is no study as important as that of history', stating further that 'true political development can only take place on a basis of profound self-knowledge'. (K.O. Dike, *African History and Self-Government in West Africa*, 1953). The positive social and patriotic effect of studying history is lost by de-emphasizing the study of history in our curricula. We can go on and on cataloguing our difficulties. In spite of whatever may be the thorns, we must continue to plod on and make out contribution to the promotion of Igbo history and culture.

Although a considerable amount of work has been done and is being done, a lot more is still left for you and those coming after you. The following areas, for instance, need to be explored much further.

1. Origins and migrations of different Igbo communities.
2. Differences and similarities in the social and political systems and constitutions.
3. The economic history: farming techniques and changes, crafts and industries, transport, trade and commerce.
4. The place of the Aro, Nri, Awka and Nkwerre, among others.
5. The Igbo and their Efik, Ibibio, Ijo, Edo, Igala and Idomaneighbours.
6. Igbo intra and inter-group relations.
7. Impact of slave trade and slavery on Igbo society e.g. Nkanu and other Igbo communities.
8. War and peace in Igboland, including the Nigerian civil war.
9. Igbo gender and cultural history.
10. Igbo urban history.

We have limitless scope to continue to enlarge Igbo history. But we should try to know what colleagues are doing and what is happening in other universities and tertiary institutions in order to reduce chances of duplication of efforts. We should also be able to draw from their experience and knowledge. Not sharing ideas is never helpful, particularly these days of internet. I am usually flattered when people tell me outside this country that they read one or two things of mine in the internet or in print. We still have a wide scope and opportunity to extend the frontiers of Igbo history. Let us continue to strive. The road may not always be strewn with roses. What is important is the determination to carry on. We should also find dignity and pride in the study and teaching of history, particularly of our homeland.