

IGBO STUDIES REVIEW: A DECADE OF PUBLISHING IGBO SCHOLARSHIP

CHIMA J. KORIEH

When the Igbo Studies Association (ISA) was formed in 1999 at the African Studies Association (ASA) Conference in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, the rationale behind its formation was to “promote and encourage research and scholarship on Igbo history, culture, social movements, linguistic, literary and artistic expressions, science and technology; to forge intellectual links, and network with scholars, policy makers, and activists inside and outside Nigeria.”¹ In addition, the Association, as a scholarly organization, seeks to participate actively and collaboratively in continental and global debates with “interested organizations in Nigeria, the U.S.A., and other countries on issues specifically relevant and correlated to Igbo studies; and to work proactively for the promotion of Igbo language with interested organizations and/ or institutions in diverse regions of the world.”²

The mission statement of the Association was set as follows

To promote and encourage scholarship on Igbo history, culture, and society in African studies, as inaugurated and initiated at the African Studies Association (ASA) Conference in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on November 8, 1999. To forge intellectual links and network with scholars, policy makers, and activists inside and outside Nigeria. To participate actively and collaboratively in continental and global debates with interested organizations in Nigeria, the U.S., and other

¹ See, <https://www.igbostudies.org/pages/about/>

² *Ibid.*

Chima J. Korieh is a Professor of African and African Diaspora History and Editor of Igbo Studies Review. His work focusing on Igbo history includes The Land Has Changed: History, Society and Gender in Colonial Eastern Nigeria (Calgary University Press, 2010).

countries on issues specifically relevant to Igbo studies. To work actively for the promotion of the Igbo language with interested organizations and/or institutions in diverse regions of the world.³

The idea behind the formation of the organization owes much to the late Professor Don Ohadike and a few other Igbo scholars, including Professors Adiele Afigbo, M.J.C Echeruo, among others, and some junior scholars, including myself and Professor Apollos Nwauwa. Professor Ohadike hosted the first meeting of Igbo scholars at Cornell University the previous year before the Philadelphia meeting. When Adiele Afigbo gave the keynote lecture at this meeting, he, like others, raised the critical issue of the state of Igbo Studies and the need to promote and encourage research in the field. The meeting in Philadelphia marked the formal establishment of the Association. From those humble beginnings, the Igbo Studies Association has emerged as a strong voice in promoting all aspects of Igbo Studies in Africa and its diaspora.

This paper, however, is not focused on the association's history but rather on the intellectual contributions of the Association to Igbo scholarship and, more generally, to African studies.

Undoubtedly, the greatest achievement of the Igbo Studies Association is the establishment of the *Igbo Studies Review* in 2013. It was the foresight and tenacity of Professor Apollos Nwauwa, the associations present, and me, drawing on my experience in scholarly publishing, that led to the establishment of the journal. However, it was the generous donation of \$10,000 by Professor Ihechukwu Madubuike that enabled the publication to take off and enabled the association to provide a free copy of the journal to each member.

As editor of the journal, I took the task of providing intellectual leadership to the Board and the production team seriously. We seek to publish scholarships of the highest quality. The *Igbo Studies Review* remains the “flagship intellectual voice for scholars specializing in the history, culture, and social dynamics of the Igbo people.”

Over the past decade of its existence, the journal has published interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary works that push disciplinary boundaries and provide a critical space for original research across multiple fields. It has published critical works that would otherwise not find an outlet in Igbo language and linguistics, as well as in history, literature, politics, economics, and religion. The journal has provided an opportunity to interrogate the Igbo Diaspora and the intersections of tradition and modernity in a globalized world. The journal has been a voice in Intellectual Resistance, publishing works that “challenge colonial narratives and external misrep-

³ Ibid.

resentations, reclaiming contributions from previously neglected African thinkers.”

The *Igbo Studies Review* has made a significant impact on the intellectual and epistemological tradition, serving as a living archive of the "Igbo Intellectual Tradition," exploring how scholars educated in Western systems negotiate the dominance of European thought while centering African knowledge. Recent volumes have highlighted critical issues such as **Digital Identity**: The role of new media in shaping contemporary Igbo selfhood; **Feminist Voices**: Re-evaluating gender fluidity and female agency beyond established literary canons; and **Language Revitalization**: Documenting youth-led efforts to preserve the Igbo language in urban and digital spaces.

Over the following decade, we hope the journal will explore old questions in Igbo studies from new perspectives. Critical to this new quest for understanding the Igbo include questions of Igbo origin and identity. The early history and origins of the Igbo people have been the subject of much speculation. And as Adiele Afigbo noted in 1975, the Igbo, like any group of people are “anxious to discover their origin and reconstruct how they came to be how 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.” The artifacts unearthed at the ancient settlement of Igbo-Ukwu in Igboland provide evidence of the antiquity of a highly developed civilization and of the Igbo's participation in West Africa's long-distance trade, including the Trans-Saharan trade. Their political and social organization before the arrival of the Europeans indicates a highly developed republican and democratic system and ideology that predated “modern” democratic political ideas and philosophy.

The arrival of Europeans on the West African coast fundamentally reshaped Igbo history. Contact began with the Portuguese in the mid-15th century, evolving into a three-century period (1434–1807) during which the Niger coast served as a hub for Portuguese, Dutch, and English traders, with the export of Igbo slaves as the primary focus. Following the 1807 abolition of the slave trade, the economy shifted toward commodities like palm products, timber, and ivory. British involvement intensified in 1849 with the appointment of a consul to the Bight of Biafra to safeguard trade and enforce anti-slavery laws. While Britain secured "protection" treaties with various Delta chiefs, their authority remained limited to the "Oil Rivers" trading ports until the mid-1880s.

Spurred by the Berlin Act of 1885, Britain moved to formalize its control. The United Africa Company aggressively secured inland treaties, while the appointment of a Consul-General at Calabar and the deploy-

ment of district officials signaled the start of a formal British administration in Southern Nigeria.⁴

From 1891 onward, London asserted its authority as both British officials and traders began pushing beyond the coast. The pacification of the region, the British argued, was necessary to eliminate internal slavery and expand palm oil production. The Niger Coast Protectorate became the Protectorate of Southern Nigeria on January 1, 1900. The new protectorate incorporated the territories formerly administered by the Royal Niger Company and the Niger Coast Protectorate. These developments would have important implications for the Igbo as the British began combining aggressive trade with aggressive imperialism. Between 1900 and 1914 (when Northern and Southern Nigeria were amalgamated), there were 21 British military expeditions into Igboland.

The expansion into Igboland met significant local resistance. Generally, the British conquest was difficult and unwelcome, and pockets of isolated resistance persisted throughout British colonial rule in the region. In 1928, for the first time in their history, Igbo men were made to pay tax as subject people.

The trajectories of change were also shaped by developments that emerged from the period of British disengagement from Nigeria. The mid-1950s were particularly significant in this regard as Nigeria entered the era of internal self-rule in 1954. The Lyttelton Constitution of 1954 provided for regional governments (Eastern, Western, and Northern) with wide powers in political and economic affairs. When the Eastern Region gained independence from Britain on October 1, 1960, the government had the opportunity to fully implement its economic policy and ideology. The new elite, under the pragmatic leadership of the Eastern Region's premier, Dr. M. I. Okpara, rejected the colonial political order but inevitably accepted the economic order bequeathed by the British. Agriculture was perceived as the source of economic development.

The Nigerian Republic once embodied the profound aspirations of the Igbo people, who arguably invested more in the nation's foundation than any other ethnic group. However, by 1966, the federation had spiraled into a political crisis, culminating in a 1967 civil war between the predominantly Igbo Eastern Region and the rest of the country. While the chronic failures of the Nigerian state have been famously chronicled by authors like Chinua Achebe, Karl Maier, and Wole Soyinka, no event proved more destabilizing than the Nigeria-Biafra War. Lasting until 1970, the conflict subjected Igbo society to unprecedented trauma, including systematic

⁴ See, for example, Elizabeth Isichei, *The Ibo and Europeans: The genesis of a relationship--to 1906* (London: Faber and Faber, 1973).

violence that eclipsed previous pogroms. Ultimately, the Igbo experience serves as a stark testament to the horrors of ethnic politics and colonial legacies, yet it also highlights a remarkable capacity for perseverance in the face of near-total extermination. Despite its significance, a single, comprehensive text encompassing the entire Igbo historical experience during this era remains unwritten.

I have provided the above historical overview to Aquent to help the reader understand the important background linking the Igbo to the broader history of Nigeria under British rule, and how the end of colonialism and the political crisis of the post-independence period not only shaped contemporary Igbo identity and its relationship to the federation of Nigeria. So, a critical area of focus is the place of the Igbo in contemporary Nigeria, the historical roots of the perceived marginalization of the Igbo, and Igbo inter- and intra-ethnic relations.

Most history texts currently available to Nigerian students gloss over this history. The journal, as well as Igbo scholars, should address these inadequacies. While most people have heard of the Igbo and the colonial experience, they have yet to read about the recent experiences. The general population and students have little inkling of the many ways that the Igbo have contributed to the development of major global and local events.

New scholarship should focus not only on the development of Igbo civilization and institutions, but more importantly, on the impact of the Igbo on the development of human civilization. Attention would also be given to external interactions, for example, the Atlantic slave trade, missionary and colonial experiences in the 20th century, and the development that followed. The rest of the world has much to learn about the nature of the Igbo indigenous democratic political institution and the gender dynamics of Igbo society. A critical analysis of the role of women in Igbo history and the family should go beyond the *Umuada* as powerful entities and the gender complementarity within the Igbo social system.

Discourses on the Nigeria-Biafra War and its centrality in the history of modern Nigeria have been lacking. The Rwandan and Darfur genocides in Africa, as was the case with the Armenian and Kosovan genocides, all reflect the historical conflagration of human bestiality and resonate with the Nazi trivialization of Jewish personhood. However, unlike the Jews and the Armenians, the Rwandan and Darfur genocides, the Igbo genocide has been neglected by scholars, activists, and community leaders. The reluctance or indifference to a systematic study and documentation of the Igbo experience in Nigeria stems from the attempt to subvert a focus on the Igbo Genocide, in which more than one million Igbos were slaughtered in a genocide fomented, orchestrated, executed, and supervised by the Nigerian state. Igbo scholarship needs to "put a face" on the

Igbo experience, centralize the discourse and public memory of the Biafra war experience, and update and reconstruct the Nigerian past.

The Igbo Studies Review acknowledged and recognized the Association's past leadership and members for their enduring contributions.