Igbo Women and Economic Transformation in Southeastern Nigeria, 1900–1960

Gloria Chuku
AFRICAN STUDIES
HISTORY, POLITICS, ECONOMY AND CULTURE

Edited by
Molefi Asante
Temple University

A ROUTLEDGE SERIES
AFRICAN STUDIES
MOLEFI ASANTE, General Editor

Kwame Nkrumah's Contribution to Pan-Africanism
An Afrocentric Analysis
D. Zizwe Poe

Nyansa (The Wisdom Knot)
Toward an African Philosophy of Education
Kwadwo A. Okrah

The Athens of West Africa
A History of International Education at Fourah Bay College, Freetown, Sierra Leone
Daniel J. Paracka, Jr.

The 'Civil Society' Problematique
Deconstructing Civility and Southern Nigeria's Ethnic Radicals
Adedayo Oluwakayode Adekson

Maat, the Moral Ideal in Ancient Egypt
A Study in Classical African Ethics
Maulana Karenga

Yoruba Traditional Healers of Nigeria
Mary Adekson

Igbo Women and Economic Transformation in Southeastern Nigeria, 1900–1960
Gloria Chuku
To Chisom, for what we have been through together.
This page intentionally left blank
Contents

List of Illustrations ix

Acknowledgments xi

Introduction 1

Chapter One
The Igbo Region before 1900: A Survey 17

Chapter Two
Women in the Economy before 1900 47

Chapter Three
"We Hold Our Families’ Bowls": Colonialism, Women, Agriculture and Food Processing 81

Chapter Four
Double Endowments or Double-Edged Sword? Women, Crafts and Local Industries 117

Chapter Five
Trade and New Economic Order 149

Chapter Six
"If Not for Trade Who Would Have Given Us Wealth?": The Women Traders 177

Chapter Seven
The Untouchable Vultures: Women in Resistance Movements 203
# List of Illustrations

## MAPS
1. Map of Nigeria Showing the Major Ethnic Groups  6
2. Igbo Region Showing Some Major Towns  7
3. Igbo Region Showing Occupational Distribution  30
4. Igbo Trade Routes in Southeastern Nigeria Before 1900  43

## PHOTOGRAPHS
2.1 The Author and Okposi Salt Producer at the Salt Lake  61
2.2 An Okposi Salt Producer Monitoring the Filtration of Salt Brine at a Salt Hut  61
2.3 Ishiagu Pottery Products  64
2.4 Uturu Mats  66
3.1 Girls Separating Palm Kernels from the Fibers at an Oil Mill  103
3.2 Palm Press and Ikwe Akwu (Palm Mortar)  103
3.3 Cassava Tubers Ready to be Peeled  105
3.4 Peeled and Washed Tubers Ready to be Grated  106
3.5 Fermented Cassava Pulp Under an Iron Press  106
3.6 Sieving Cassava Pulp

3.7 Frying Sieved Pulp to Produce Gari

4.1 An Akwete Weaver

4.2 Akwete Weaver and the Horizontal Broadloom

4.3 Spinning and Weaving at the Akwete Cooperative Society Center

4.4 Akwete Cloths Displayed at the Marketing Section of the Weaving Center

6.1 Women Going to a Rural Market

6.2 A Typical Igbo Rural Market Dominated by Women

6.3 A Section of the Onitsha Main Market Dominated by Men

6.4 A Typical Urban Market Showing Men Occupying the Shades and Women Selling their Petty Goods in the Open

Illustrations

107

108

137

138

140

140

180

182

184

187
Acknowledgments

From the inception of this research through the various drafts this work has gone through to its completion, many individuals and institutions have rendered so much support and assistance to me that it is hard to remember all or even adequately acknowledge them. Without their immeasurable assistance and support, this book would not have been written. I am grateful to the former Imo State University, Okigwe, Nigeria, for the pre-doctoral research grant which enabled me to carry out research for my dissertation. Mention should also be made of a summer fellowship from the Center for African Studies, University of Florida, Gainesville and the opportunity extended to me as a visiting scholar by the James Coleman African Studies Center at the University of California, Los Angeles. The Centers gave me an immeasurable opportunity to review secondary sources that have helped a great deal to enrich the theoretical and comparative aspects of this book.

My special appreciation goes to Adiele Afigbo and Onwuka Njoku, my academic advisors whose advice and guidance saw me through the completion of my dissertation, the first phase of this project. I cannot in particular thank Adiele Afigbo enough for sending me from Oxford, United Kingdom and at his own cost, all the Rhodes House documents/files cited in this book.

I am also grateful to Don Ohadike, John Oriji, Stanley Harrold, Lisa Lindsay and Josh Arinze who read some of the draft chapters of this work for their insightful comments, suggestions and encouragement which helped shape this book.

This book relies extensively on primary sources: archival and oral data. It is for this reason that I will ever be grateful to all the people that assisted me during my archival research and fieldwork. I am thankful to the staff of the Nigerian National Archives, Enugu, Ibadan and Kaduna branches as well as those at the Public Record Office, Kew Gardens, London. I am in particular indebted to O. Uwakwe Esse, the director of
Enugu branch of the Nigerian National Archives, and Christian Uzor, one of his staff for their sense of duty, commitment to work and assistance. Mr. Esse has worked tirelessly, in spite of many constraints, to “revolutionize” the Enugu archives by producing volumes of finders’ aids and guides and instilling in his staff a sense of responsibility to duty that facilitate researchers’ work. He is always eager to assist researchers who visit the archives even if it amounts to making personal sacrifices. I thank him for all this and also for his friendship.

My appreciation also goes to over one hundred and twenty respondents I interviewed, my interpreters and research assistants some of whom have helped in making the history recorded in this book. In particular, I am grateful to Madams Martha Nwapa, Rosemary Inyama, Onokoro Nwa Enyi Nwoti, Margaret Nwogu, Rose Edoga, Mary Enigwe, Rhoda Oksia, Joy Madunta, Nnenna Okoro and many others. Some of these women, as well as such men as Nnanna Nwachuku, Eze A. N. Iheoma, Willie Uwakwe, Dr. J.O. Ijoma, Peter Ezeh, Owelle George Okafor, Onyiba Aja Nwachukwu, Eze L. N. Nwanosike, Eze Acholonu, and others offered me invaluable information, hospitality and assistance in establishing contacts with potential respondents. Mrs. Ngozi Umeasiegbu, my sister, who lived in Umuida, Enugu-Ezike and Ovoko, Nsukka as a teacher for seven years helped me a great deal. In addition to introducing me to contact persons/interpreters and respondents in the Nsukka zone, she also offered me words of encouragement and hospitality that cannot be quantified here.

I am no less indebted to my friends and colleagues—Chidi Nwaubani, Godfrey Uzoigwe, Don and Edith Anadu and LaRay Denzer for their supportive conversations and assistance in this and other endeavors.

I am grateful to the staff of the Interlibrary Loan Units of the South Carolina State University, Orangeburg, SC and Morgan State University, Baltimore, Maryland for their invaluable assistance. I wish to thank Jaime Alvarez of Towson University, Maryland for the maps. My special appreciation goes to Molefi Asante, the series editor, and Kimberly Guinta of Routledge for their sense of urgency, professional guidance, and understanding.

I am indebted to my family: my mother, Madam Hanna Chuku, sisters, brothers, relatives, and my daughter Chisom for their invaluable support and encouragement. In particular, I will ever remain indebted to my little angel Chisom, who started handling books and files with me even before she began to talk. She is such a special gift that I do not know if I would have completed this book without her understanding and the inspiration I derive from her. I cannot quantify the hope and sense of perseverance she has of-
Acknowledgments

I am grateful to all who supported me especially at the most critical times of this project. Finally, I am grateful to the Almighty God for His love and mercies.

Gloria Chuku
Baltimore, Maryland
This page intentionally left blank
Introduction

Serious and systematic study of the place and role of women in African history is a recent phenomenon, dating from the 1980s. Since then, gender has become an increasingly important analytical tool in the reconstruction of the histories of African societies. This study not only uses gender as an analytical tool but it also contributes to the pool of micro historical studies of African women. It investigates the role of Igbo women in the economic transformation of southeastern Nigeria, from the genesis of British colonial rule in 1900 to the dawn of independence in 1960.

Among Africanists and feminists, the Igbo-speaking women of southeastern Nigeria are well known for their history of anti-colonial activism which was most demonstrated in the 1929 War against British colonialism. Perplexed by the magnitude of the Women’s War, the colonial government commissioned anthropologists/ethnographers to study the Igbo political system and the place of women in Igbo society. The primary motive was to have a better understanding of the Igbo in order to avoid a repeat of the Women’s War. The outcome was the publication of two books on the Igbo women and their society. The fact that these studies served government purposes is a major limitation on their value. They were not motivated by a real desire to study and understand Igbo women in their own right. Moreover, the studies were based on synchronic instead of diachronic approach and therefore ignored the dynamics of change and historical perspective in their analyses. There was also the fact that these early studies were carried out by Europeans who, not only believed in rigid Victorian gender roles, but also had very limited knowledge of the complexities of Igbo culture and language. These works were also limited in scope, depth and coverage. For example, contrary to the ambitious title of Sylvia Leith-Ross book *African Women: A Study of the Igbo of Nigeria*, the study covers only very few villages in the Owerri region. In spite of the limitations of their studies, Leith-Ross and Margaret Green initiated the foundation for the study of Igbo
women. Yet, since the time of these colonial studies, and with the exception of the works of Ifi Amadiume and Susan Martin, there has been no systematic study of Igbo women and their role in the political economy of southeastern Nigeria.

Amadiume’s work is a major contribution to the study of gender relations in Igbo society. However, the book is limited in scope because it focuses on Nnobi, a small central Igbo community. The problem is that gender relations in Igbo society were much more complex than presented in the book. In this study, therefore, I will analyze the complexity and flexibility of gender relations in Igbo society with emphasis on such major cultural zones as the Anioma, the Ngwa, the Onitsha, the Nsukka, and the Aro. Similarly, Martin’s study of palm oil protest in the Ngwa area is also limited in scope. Here, she captures the interplay of gender roles and politics of control in the face of economic innovations and changes unleashed by British colonialism in the palm oil industry. In this monograph, I argue that Igbo women had played more important roles in the economic transformation of southeastern Nigeria between 1900 and 1960 than have been acknowledged in the existing works. Their economic activities went beyond the oil palm industry and included active participation in farming, food production and processing, salt and pottery production, weaving, and trading. Thus, while filling the gaps in the above works, this study systematically examines the crucial role Igbo women played in the political economy of southeastern Nigeria during colonialism.

Colonialism, as demonstrated in existing works on various African societies, had far-reaching consequences on women, their economic activities and socio-political roles. While unleashing innovative factors that stimulated the active participation of Igbo women in the production and distributive processes, which increased their workload and enhanced their economic power, colonialism, in addition to such other external factors as Western education and expansion in international trade, export production, increased urbanization, improved transportation systems, and the introduction of new technologies and food crops, as well as wars also played contradictory roles in undermining women’s status, especially those in the rural areas. This study explores these contradictory effects of colonialism on Igbo women. It examines how and in what ways colonialism and the above external factors enhanced the economic power of Igbo women as well as how they eroded their social status. In this study, I argue that Igbo women, as a result of colonialism in particular, intensified their activities in the three major economic foundations of southeastern Nigeria, namely, agriculture, crafts and local industrial production, and trade. Women were a formidable
force in terms of their contributions to the economic, social and political development of the society. In their economic activities, women demonstrated considerable resilience and adaptability, blending their indigenous skills with new ideas and techniques.

The role of Igbo women during the era of the slave trade and in the transition to the so-called legitimate trade, which formed the background of this study, has not also attracted much scholarly attention. This monograph is therefore unique in many ways because while filling these gaps, it also addresses some of the stereotypes and misconceptions about Igbo women: for instance, the notions that they were confined to domestic work during the colonial period, and that they were not receptive to exogenous ideas and innovations. The study shows that more than any other social groups in the region, Igbo women had not only demonstrated their receptivity to new opportunities but had also contributed most to the sustenance of the colonial export economy and the domestic economy of southeastern Nigeria especially during World Wars I and II. The Igbo contribution to the British war economy is an important aspect of the people’s history that requires scholarly investigation. Unfortunately, scholars have not paid much attention to this topic. This study is going to contribute to this neglected aspect of Igbo history by examining the role played by women in the win-the-war programs and especially in the war economy. I argue that in spite of government neglect of food production and the wartime measures taken to ensure an increased export production, women persevered and intensified their agricultural activities to produce enough food that not only sustained the dense Igbo population (including the military) but also was enough for export to other parts of the colony and to overseas.

Another important contribution of this study is the exploration of the major changes in gender relations and ideological transformations within local and regional economic networks and structures that occurred during the colonial period. Influenced by the Victorian gender ethos, colonial administrators, Christian missionaries, and expatriate trading companies favored men more than women in their policies and programs. The new gender ideology facilitated the changes in gender roles in the region. Thus, this period witnessed an influx of men into economic activities hitherto dominated by women. For example, the introduction of new techniques in the oil palm industry and increased commercialization of palm oil and palm kernels brought men into the industry. Men not only entered the industry, they also controlled it. As a result, women never regained the control of the oil palm industry that was hitherto their main domain. Similarly, the introduction of mechanized graters broke women’s monopoly of the
Igbo Women and Economic Transformation in Southeastern Nigeria

cassava industry in the region. Men owned the graters and were trained on how to operate them. They also dominated the wholesale trade in such cassava products as gari and starch especially outside the Igbo area and during the war years. Women also lost their control of the marketplace to men. While men dominated regional and international trades at the wholesale and even retail levels, majority of Igbo women were relegated to petty trade in urban and rural markets. However, the new economic opportunities unleashed by colonialism and foreign capital made a few Igbo women engage in regional and international trades. The women were able to diversify their economic activities. Some of them assumed greater responsibilities as heads of household and breadwinners of their families.

Some explanations to the gender differentiation in response to colonial policies and condition in the region are also provided in this study. Questions regarding why Igbo women were more visible than men in anti-colonial movements can be explained in many ways. One reason is that certain colonial policies favored men more than women—appointment of men as warrant chiefs, members of the Native Courts, market administrators, and their recognition as heads of household with accruing economic benefits. The complaisance of men to colonial policy in the region can also be explained in their fear of reprisal by the colonial authorities. Women as a group enjoyed certain immunity that was not always available to men. They acted as untouchable vultures in their resistance to certain colonial, missionary, and foreign trading companies’ policies and programs that threatened their religious, political and economic spaces. Women’s invulnerability as vultures explained why they acted when men could not and also why they achieved relative high degree of success in their resistance movements. Other than Don Ohadike’s study of the Ekumeku resistance movement of the western Igbo against colonialism and Christianity, there is no other major work on this important topic. Thus, my study will serve as a contribution toward redressing the lack of any serious studies on Igbo women’s resistance movements. I will in addition to the well-known Women’s War of 1929, examine other Igbo women’s wars and protest demonstrations directed not only against the colonial government and its agents but also against the Christian missionaries, foreign trading companies and local authorities between 1916 and 1954.

While providing a global range of comparative material on colonial discourse, this Nigerian study, has the potential to modify Africanists’ and feminists’ understanding of colonialism’s influence on gender and economic roles of both rural and urban populations, as well as the role of women in wartime economies. As the first systematic and sustained study of Igbo
women and their economic activities, grounded in the economic and socio-political history of colonial and wartime southeastern Nigeria, the book tackles the larger issues of colonialism, gender relations and ideological transformations, as well as wars and resistance. It provides information for the comparative study of women and their societies not only in Africa but also in the African Diasporas and other regions of the world.

THE IGBO OF SOUTHEASTERN NIGERIA—WOMEN AND THE ECONOMY

The Igbo-speaking people are found in southeastern Nigeria. They number approximately 25 million and occupy an area of about 40,922 square kilometers, covering the present Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo, as well as parts of Rivers and Delta States. The Igbo are the third largest ethnic group (after the Hausa and the Yoruba) in Nigeria. Broadly, the Igbo area is culturally homogeneous. However, there are some significant cultural variations between Igbo sub-groups. These cultural variations are examined in detail in chapter one to delineate an appropriate working definition for this study. Igbo society is an open one in which every individual regards himself/herself as good as any other. This belief has fostered progressive competition among the people. The absence of entrenched monarchical institutions in most of the Igbo region created loose political and social classes that made it possible for anyone who was resourceful enough to rise to any position in the society.

Various classification models based on occupations can be applied to Igbo women. This study portrays them largely in terms of the female principle. The female principle embodies all aspects of women’s activities within the society. A detailed discussion of the female principle requires a delineation of the Igbo women into either rural or urban groups. This is because it is the place of residence, which to a very large extent, conditions the occupational roles of individuals. The period under study witnessed increased urbanization in the Igbo area and this had a great impact on women. Moreover, a classification based on urban and rural criterion is important in examining the contradictory effects of colonialism on women. Rural women were mostly farmers, food processors, potters, weavers, petty-traders, priestesses and female priests. Urban women were predominantly petty-traders, merchants, contractors, entrepreneurs, designers and seamstresses, teachers, nurses, politicians and wage earners. Many of these women were their families’ or household economists and home managers.

Like any other economy, that of southeastern Nigeria has undergone evolutionary and sometimes revolutionary change. The transition was generally from subsistence-oriented to market-oriented economies. While in
subsistence-oriented economy, production was primarily for consumption, in market-oriented, production was largely for exchange. Internally, the economy was a product of centuries of continuous interaction between the Igbo genius and the environment. It was a dynamic, diversified and market-oriented economy whose foundation rested on agriculture, manufacture and trade. Externally, the activities of the European explorers, traders, trading companies, missionaries and colonial administrators facilitated changes in Igbo economy. It is important to state here that the transitions experienced by the Igbo economy were gradual. The categories delineated above are not mutually exclusive, for within the predominant market-oriented stage of the Igbo economy, there exist some features of communal subsistence.

IGBO WOMEN AND GENDER RELATIONS

Igbo society was a gendered one. Here, the flexibility and dynamism of gender construct, and the fact that roles were not rigidly masculinized or
Introduction

Map 2. Igbo Region Showing Some Major Towns

feminized remain undisputed. The flexibility of gender relations allowed women to play male roles and vice versa. It also created a female hierarchy that made certain categories of women superior or inferior to others. Igbo society was in most cases a dual-sex symmetrical system where individuals were valued for their social duties and responsibilities, and where though roles were gendered, females were not defined in antithesis to males. A male could assume a role and status of a female and vice versa a female. In each circumstance, the individual usually enjoyed certain privileges, power and authority over others by virtue of playing that particular gender role. The gender position(s) an individual assumed determined his or her function not only in the kin group but also within the mode of production.

What prevailed in precolonial Igbo society was dual-sex symmetry where social roles and responsibilities were the channels through which power diffused and where gender equality was viewed according to comparative worth. Therefore, in this study, gender is a useful category for
analyzing the history of not only pre-European contact Igbo society but also the colonial history of the region. Gender is used here as a social and historical construct as well as a systematic structuring of relationships between men and women in society. Gender construct is a social identity that can be ascribed or achieved through the conceptual roles of male and female.

Pre-twentieth century Igbo society, though predominantly patrilineal, had matrilineal and dual-descent subgroups as in Ohafia and Afikpo. In Ohafia bilateral descent system, while matrilineal descent groups held agricultural land, patrilineal descent groups controlled residential property. In each of the descent groups—patrilineal, matrilineal and dual-descent—the flexibility of gender roles and identities created avenues for both men and women to excel in society. Though there were hierarchical relationships determined by age, experience, marital status and rites of initiation, these social divisions were neither rigid nor posed obstructions to social mobility. What accorded power, authority and respect to an individual in Igbo society were such positive attributes as moral probity, persuasive oratory, charismatic leadership, outstanding military/heroic service or gallant prowess, intellectual and business acumen. Industriousness, acquisition of specialized skills and knowledge, accumulation of material wealth, supporters and subordinates as well as independence and assertiveness were no monopoly of one gender. They were open not only to both genders but also to different age sects, hence the Igbo proverb, “nwata kwọcha aka ya, osoro ndiokenye rie m i” (literally translated as “a child who washes his/her hands very well eats with the elderly”).

The fundamental belief that all individuals are endowed with the natural right to develop their potential inculcated the ethics of hard work that promoted industriousness and resourcefulness in Igbo society. Wealth as a major prerequisite for status enhancement invariably determined the flexibility of gender roles in the society. The principle of seniority, which could be determined by biological age or by order of marriage into a lineage group or by membership of an association or organization also, guided relationships between males and females in society. Age elevated some women, especially postmenopausal ones, from females to males, a status that gave them opportunity to participate in certain ceremonies that were the exclusive preserves of males. Similarly, the first wife of a man ranked higher than his other wives no matter her age. Generally, gender positions placed a higher regard on ability and achievement than on biological sex. Thus, in Igbo society, there were women, who by ascription or their own achievement, occupied such important social positions as female kings and queens, priestesses and female priests, wives and female husbands, daughters and female sons as well as mothers and female fathers.
In Igbo society, just as among the Bamileke of Cameroon, the Nandi and Luo of Kenya, as well as the Dinka and Nuer of Sudan, and in Dahomey, where woman-to-woman marriage was practiced, a woman assumed a social function of a husband to another woman. This social relationship did not involve sexual contact between the two. Rather the female husband contracted a man to play the genital role while she played the social role as well as performed economic responsibility to her wife and children. The children belonged to the female husband because she paid the bridewealth on their mother, and not to their biological father. She played the role of female father to the children. Woman-to-woman marriage served many functions such as compensating barren or childless woman, a mode for labor recruitment, continuation of a lineage, and a source of prestige. Similarly, in the absence of a son or a male descendant, a daughter was asked to stay in the family to assume the status of a female son and was encouraged to procreate to maintain the continuity of the family and the lineage. In this capacity, she played the roles of a daughter and a female son, as well as female father and the head of her family upon the death of her father. As a female son, she owned land and inherited the family property. These gender roles are discussed in detail in the proceeding chapters.

METHODOLOGY AND SOURCES

In parts of the world where writing developed late, researchers have to rely on many sources and employ many techniques to gather information. In general, writing was not widespread in pre-European contact sub-Saharan Africa. This means that scholars working on this period have very little in the form of written and archival sources, and therefore they have to rely on oral and ethnographic traditions. In this study, oral tradition refers to all orally transmitted testimonies about the past, especially those passed from generation to generation, as well as a people's folklore.

Oral tradition has been criticized because of the unreliability of human memory, questions of chronology, individual biases, and group prejudices. Historians however, now accept that all sources, including written ones, have their pitfalls, and that the viability of oral traditions is improved by applying to them the same critical yardsticks historians apply to all other sources. Thus in this study, oral traditions are one of the key means used in recovering women's voices and their life history.

This book expands upon my dissertation (Chuku, 1995), which examined the changing role of women in Igbo economy between 1929 and 1985. I chose Igbo women because of lack of any systematic and detailed studies of their economic contributions to the Igbo society. The heart of the
investigation consisted of three years of fieldwork (1991–1993) in the Igbo area with more than 200 oral questionnaires and 118 interviews with both men and women some of whom were major actors and participants, eyewitnesses, relatives, friends, enemies and people who were neutral to events covered in this book. I conducted archival research in 1992–93 at the Enugu, Ibadan and Kaduna branches of the Nigerian National Archives. I have, also since 1995, been carrying out intermittent searches at the Enugu branch in addition to some research at the Public Record Office, Kew, London, in 2002. In the summer of 2003, I did some video documentary and took some photographs of important historical sites and economic activities associated with Igbo women in southeastern Nigeria. I also undertook additional research at the James Coleman African Studies Center, UCLA in 1998–99 as well as at the University of Florida, in Gainesville, in the summer of 2001 in order to include comparative material on the economic activities of other African women and to expand the theoretical focus in four directions: the contradictory effects of colonialism on Africans and their societies, gender roles and responses to colonialism, women in war economies, and the complexity of gender and indigenous response to exogenous ideas and innovations.

Every village in the Igbo region has certain individuals who have achieved respect and recognition due to their acclaimed knowledge of their community history. In some communities, certain individuals have been detailed to tell the official histories of their societies, which in most cases, suffer from historical distortion. In such situations, the use of corroborative method as well as adequate fieldwork skills and interpretation of historical data became imperative.

One of the problems I encountered in my fieldwork was how to deal with the reluctance of some people to grant interviews as well as how to negotiate the problem of group silence and selective memory. Some rural women, in particular, saw no need for the interviews, and at times were skeptical about the purpose of the interviews even after extensive explanations had been made. While some simply refused to answer certain questions, others withheld some information simply because I failed to ask the right questions. Some were reluctant to respond to such sensitive, emotional or touchy questions as whether they were descendants of slaves or those that might expose the dark side of their lives or of their relatives. In most cases wives were reluctant to talk about members of their husbands’ lineage group, always giving an excuse that they are “strangers” there. To a great degree, this excuse is justifiable. In many Igbo communities, wives as individuals had no status in their husbands’ lineage group. They were seen as “long-time visitors,” and it was even worse if the woman was childless. As
a result, they had no access to certain aspects of the history of their husbands and their communities. Unfortunately, in their natal lineages, where they were regarded as powerful and influential lineage members, some women were so young (twelve—fourteen years) when they were married away that they did not remember their histories. Some respondents would ask me not to write down or tape what they told me. Sometimes, they would ask me to interview their chief or elders. In group interviews, some were not usually relaxed or open to answer all the questions. As a result, group interviews did not always yield much reliable information.

Another problem I encountered had to do with transportation. The Igbo region is a vast one, and the main research subjects live in many scattered and poverty-ridden rural communities. Rural neglect by the government has resulted in few motorable roads and even these are only accessible during the dry season. Some communities were only accessible by bicycle and or by motorbike. At times, these means of transport were scarce and could make one wait for hours or resort to walking. Some of the communities have no guesthouses or restaurants. I remember missing my way on a number of occasions because most roads and paths connecting Igbo villages have no signs. To minimize the problems, I used extended family members, friends, colleagues, and students to establish contacts in some communities. Through such contacts, I was introduced to local chiefs, elders and other custodians of local historical knowledge whom I interviewed. On a few occasions, some form of hospitality was extended to me through such contacts. I also employed the services of local dialect interpreters and guides who are fluent and conversant with the dialects of the people and also familiar and well known to the respondents and their communities.

Despite these difficulties, I found that the majority of the people I met were willing to either tell stories about themselves or about others. Many saw the process as an opportunity to publicize their trades, crafts and achievements. Women farmers, local crafts producers and traders were proud to talk about their experiences, individually or collectively. Most women cooperative societies and other women associations were happy to disseminate information about their organizations. Some saw the interviews as means of advertising their products (as in the case of Akwete Women’s Weaving and Dyeing Cooperative Society), and others as an avenue of seeking assistance.

It is important to note that the positionality of a researcher is very crucial in gathering historical data through fieldwork. The researcher’s positionality not only affects his/her approach to seeking historical information but also his/her relationship with the respondents, the amount and quality
of information gathered as well as the interpretation of such evidence. This raises the issue of where to be as "insider" or "outsider" researcher. To what extent does an insider enjoy more privileges than an outsider? How do respondents treat both categories of researcher? Who appeals most to the respondents and consequently benefit most from them? In view of the importance of understanding the language and being knowledgeable about the culture of the people and about the geography of the region, I can say that insider researchers enjoy certain privileges over the outsiders.

I saw myself largely as an insider, having been born and bred in the Igbo area. I understand and speak Igbo language fluently, and as a result, all my interviews were conducted in Igbo, which I later translated to English. However, in some cases, I saw myself as a "relative insider," especially in Nsukka, Nkalagu, Abakaliki, Ohaozara, Afikpo, and Ngwa areas where I encountered dialects of differing mutual intelligibility. In these areas, in most cases, I had to rely on local interpreters. I was forced to learn how to deal with the inherent problems of relying on interpreters, who might interrupt the flow of the interviews, or worse still, complicate, misinterpret or distort information.

My knowledge of sociocultural processes of the Igbo is very useful in recovering women's histories. There are certain ceremonies and traditions that have survived the impact of European contact. One of such is the annual *ibu ibu* rite (homage), popular among the Aro. This tradition institutionalizes ties among individual males in a hierarchical order, and is defined by social origins, age and kinship affiliations. By the same token, people of servile origin pay homage to the descendants of their former masters.

Chronology or periodization has been identified as one of the major weaknesses of oral traditions, oral narratives and oral history. I was faced with the problem of periodizing the oral narratives and histories given by respondents who could neither read nor write, nor, remember important dates associated with events and individuals they talked about. I minimized this problem through my familiarity with Igbo geography and knowledge of the sociocultural processes of the people. The Igbo have important markers/indicators of time, such as wars (inter-village or town wars, wars with neighbors, wars of subjugation by the British and world wars), certain natural disasters (severe famine, flood, Eclipse of the sun), death of important individuals, chieftaincy coronations, major community achievements, and festivals.

The following are some of the time indicators, which I used in my fieldwork: *Tupu ndi mishonari eweta ozioma n'ala Igbo*—Before the missionaries introduced Christianity in Igboland, *Ọwụrụ mgbe akana agba obu*—If it was during the slave trade and *Mgbe ndi ọcha gbara* Ibiniukpabi—When the
Introduction

white man invaded the Ibiniukpabi Oracle. This event occurred between 1901 and 1902. Others include: **Oge ọgbọ olọko ọgafere Umuahia gaba Enugwu**—When the train passed through Umuahia to Enugu (that was in 1916), **Oge ifulenza**—During the Influenza Epidemics of 1918–19 (mostly associated with the diffusion, acceptance and cultivation of cassava in many Igbo communities), **Oge ọgu ụmumuńyi**—the time of the Women’s War (1929), **Oge agba Bōma**—During the Burma War, 1943–45 (associated with the conscription of Igbo men into the British colonial army, and certain export production drive employed by the British colonial government to increase production), **Oge igwulube nke mbu na nke abuọ dara**—the first and second visitation of the locusts in Eastern Nigeria occurred in the 1930s and 1940s respectively, **Mgbe chi jiri ẹhịhejie**—Eclipse of the sun in 1948/49, and **Oge ọgu nkporo jia kpụ**—the time of cassava stick war (the introduction of school fees women’s demonstration occurred in 1956 at Orlu Division). I was able to determine actual or approximate dates of events by relating them to these and other previously determined periods of time or well-known dates. I was also able to ascertain time estimates through natural life cycles such as age of apprenticeship to a trade or craft, age of marriage, birth, child spacing, lactation, membership of age-grades and others.

My familiarity with certain aspects of Igbo material culture proved an invaluable asset to this study. Such material culture as architectural structures and designs, wall and body paintings, household equipment, agricultural implements, other tools, ornaments, and ritual objects have helped in recovering the history of the Igbo. Igbo women have expressed and transmitted knowledge of their society over time through arts, aesthetics and other unwritten forms. Woven cloths, pottery, ornaments, body and wall paintings, jewelry, hair-styles, aesthetics, masks and masquerades associated with women were not only considered in this study for their utilitarian value but also as embodiments of Igbo cultural heritage and history. Igbo women, as producers and users of art objects, have succeeded in preserving and transmitting their society’s cultural values and knowledge from generation to generation. Through women’s arts, the history of the Igbo is not only reconstructed but also preserved for posterity.

This study also benefits from my knowledge of Igbo myths, proverbs, idioms and songs. Myths relate to powerful spiritual forces that affect human actions. Some Igbo myths have a sense of the faraway past, and contain some historical information. While songs tell stories in melody, proverbs reflect the sensibility of the Igbo. Igbo women are known to have composed songs reflecting certain historical events and experiences in their lives and societies. Some of the songs praised notable individuals in the society, or were about
war, or were a means of condemning certain actions. Generally, songs, in Igbo society, serve a variety of purpose: as a means of social control, to praise some people, to celebrate childbirth, marriage, or to observe a death. Many of the epic songs of the Ohafia Igbo include images of women, some of whom are “the great mothers” or the dike nwami—brave and extraordinary women who like their male counterparts, have brought human heads back from the battlefield, women such as Nne Egbelenwa, Inyan Olugu, Nne Mgbafo and Nne Uko. Nne Uko, for instance, was so outstanding that she was admitted into the all-male Ekpe society. She was a female husband and a priestess of her family Ududu shrine.17

A proverb (ilu) reflects condensed wisdom drawn from human experience. It is a product of detailed observation of the behavior of human beings, animals, plants, and natural phenomena. Proverbs also reflect folklores, beliefs, values, attitudes, perspectives, emotions, and an entire system of thought and feeling. As Raphael Madu rightly observes, “proverbs are the kernel in which the wisdom of the traditional Igbo people is contained.”18 A number of Igbo proverbs are used in the text.

ORGANIZATION

Using thematic approach, the Igbo women’s story is told in eight chapters. Chapter one culturally surveys the Igbo region, focusing on the people’s social organizations and political structures as well as their religious life. This chapter also delineates the region’s economic zones. Chapter two discusses the economic role of women before 1900, and serves as a foundation to understanding the major changes that took place in Igbo economy from the colonial period to the time of independence in 1960. Chapter three examines the introduction of colonial rule and colonial economic policy in the Igbo area. It analyzes issues of gender and land tenure, labor, and resource control in processing a variety of crops and food. Chapter four examines the various crafts and local industries associated with women during the colonial period. The major economic activities discussed here are salt production, pottery, and weaving (especially mats and cotton cloths). The focus is on the innovations introduced and their impact on these industrial activities. In chapter five, the new economic order created by foreign capital and British colonialism is examined. It looks at how the opportunities which included the introduction of a new monetary system, an improved transportation system, pax Britannica, and increased urbanization affected gender roles in the various aspects of trade in the region. Chapter six explores the activities of women traders in southeastern Nigeria. It discusses the role of women in local, long-distance, transborder and international trades as petty
traders, specialist traders, brokers or middlewomen and international merchants. Included in this chapter is an analysis of the articles of trade, trade organization, as well as the impacts of the monetization of Igbo economy, improved transportation system, and increased urbanization on women and their trading activities. The connections between wealth and gender relations, political power and social mobility are analyzed too.

Chapter seven is an analysis of the role of women in resistance and anti-colonial movements. Various social control mechanisms, organizational skills and networks employed by women to protect their economic, religious and political spaces are discussed. Profiles of some outstanding women leaders are examined to demonstrate their leadership qualities, organizational skills, women's strength in unity and solidarity, their resilience and determination. While reiterating the continuities and transformations in the social, political, and economic systems as well as gender relations of the Igbo, chapter eight which concludes this book, highlights the major contributions of women in the economic development of southeastern Nigeria between 1900 and 1960. Igbo women and Igbo economy are placed in a global historical context. Through this process, it becomes clear why certain aspects of Igbo women's history are unique to them, and why in some other instances, they share similar experiences with their counterparts in various African societies.
Chapter One
The Igbo Region before 1900:
A Survey

The Igbo area was and still is broadly culturally homogeneous. Igbo language has been the key unifying factor of the Igbo. It is the most important single trait marking out the people as a distinct group and to which they could claim of being the symbol of pan-Igbo. However, wide variations in the ecology of the Igbo region as well as the impact of neighboring non-Igbo peoples have resulted in local differences within the broad Igbo culture area. Such local variations are manifested in social, cultural and political institutions and organizations, architectural traditions, and multiple dialects. Arising from these local variations, some ethnographers and scholars have divided the Igbo into five main sub-cultural groups. One of them, Adiele Afigbo, has the following as Igbo sub-cultural zones: the Northern, the Western, the Southern, the Eastern and the Northeastern Igbo.1

Similarly, Daryll Forde and Gwilym Jones have classified the Igbo area as follows: Northern or Onitsha Igbo, Southern or Owerri Igbo, Western Igbo, Eastern or Cross River Igbo, and Northeastern Igbo.2 Another classification of the region by Michael Onwuejeogwu delineates six sub-cultural groups, namely: the Southern half of the scarplands of South-eastern Nigeria nurturing Anambra and Nri Civilizations; the Southern half of the lower Niger basin producing Ndoshimili, Ukwuani and Enuani Civilizations; the Mid-west low lands nurturing Ika and Enuani Civilizations; the Niger Delta for Ndoshimili and Ukwuani Civilizations; the Palm belt of southeastern of Owerri and Ngwa civilizations; and the Cross River Basin producing Afikpo, Abam-Edda and Aro Civilizations.3 These sub-cultural areas share in common Igbo cultural heritage and enable us to understand the complex nature of Igbo cultural practices and sociopolitical structures. However, they offer little or no information on the economic activities of the people. Thus,
a new classification model is formulated. This model is primarily based on the varying geography and ecology of Igbo region and how they affected the three main economic activities of the people, namely, agriculture, manufacture and trade. The proffered groupings, which are discussed later in details, are *Ndi-Olugbo*—Agriculturists/Farmers; *Ndi-Oluaka*—Manufacturers; and *Ndi-Ahia*—Traders. At this juncture, the sociopolitical structure of the Igbo people is examined to enable us understand the nature of the society Igbo women operated in.

**SOCIOPOLITICAL STRUCTURE**

The Igbo basically organized themselves in lineages based on the concepts of *ama/uno* (natural family of a man, his wife/wives, children and dependants); *umunma* (joint family or children of a common forefather); *Ogbe/onumara* (maximal lineage/village); and *mba/obodo* (village-group/compact village/town). Each of these had its own power structures, which were hierarchically organized, but while the *umunma* was the basic social unit, *obodo/mba* was the single basic political unit of the Igbo. The various autonomous village-groups that made up the Igbo region had either corporate or dual-sex political patterns. In both systems, men and women played important functions, though the difference lay in the degree of their participation in politics especially in the public decision-making processes of their individual polities.

**Corporate Political System**

The corporate political system was predominantly a male’s domain. Here, men controlled the political structure of their society. Authority was in the hands of the king (or *Obi/Eze*, where such position existed) and council of elders and titled men (or *Ndichie*). However, the flexibility of gender roles and Igbo political structure has made it possible for some women to occupy positions of importance in the system. As noted in an earlier work, Igbo women had played a significant role in their societies’ political systems. Women had held a variety of political offices including exercising political authority as rulers, acted as agents, sat on the king’s council, served as go-betweens in diplomatic relations, and safeguarded their towns and villages in many ways.

An example of women who had exercised political authority as rulers is the case of *Ezenwanyi* (Female king) Nnenne Mgbokwo Udo Omini Oke Nnachi, referred in Arochukwu traditions as the fourth Aro ruler, who probably reigned between the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.