

## IGBO HISTORY OF ORIGIN

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### Abstract

We are still looking towards our historians to supply us with valid and acceptable answer to the origin of the Igbo people. We are no longer comfortable with guesswork and quoting an Igbo slave, Olaudah Equiano and some 'out-of-bar' statements made by some Igbo elders in connection to the origin of the Igbo. That Igbo is a migrant group is no longer debatable as no ethnic group over the world can boast of not migrating from somewhere or mixed up with one or other migrant groups from elsewhere. Therefore, no matter how beautifully we might argue that the Igbo do not belong to or have some elements of migrant groups in them may not be seen as historically true.

### Introduction

Nothing about the Igbo could be more historic than their origin, which over the years has provoked challenges and tussles amongst the historians of Igbo extraction and beyond. According to Isichei (1976: 3) no historical question arouses more interest among present-day Igbo than the enquiry "where do the Igbo come from?"

According to Nwadike (2002: 3) the first person to ask such a question was no other one than the person who made the first attempt at the answer. He was Olaudah Equiano, the famous Gustavus Vassa the African.

Having said the above, it is pertinent to know the present location of the people whose history will be learnt in this chapter. The Igbo people are located in the South-eastern and South-western Nigeria. In the South-east they completely occupy Enugu, Anambra, Imo, Abia and Ebonyi States and parts of Rivers and Cross River States. In the South-western Nigeria, the Igbo occupy from Asaba to Agbor, covering four of the fourteen Local Government Areas of Delta State. In the East, the Igbo share a boundary with the Ibibio, while in the West they share a boundary with Edo and Warri people. The Igbo share their Northern boundary with the Idoma, and their Southern boundary with the Ijaw and the Ogoni.

The Igbo live in scattered villages and communities. A community may be made up of a pumber of villages sharing the same cultural identity, and a village made up of homesteads that have a common blood tie. As a result of this, each member of the community or village sees the other people ps brothers and sisters.

According to Stride and Ifeka (1971:346-7) the Igbo people are historically very important for three reasons: The first is that the way they organize their political life provides fascinating point of pornpapon with the political organization of centralized states and empires. Secondly, the Igbo had a **complex** network of trading routes, which linked the separate settlements in which they lived. These trac;c **routes** apd commercial contacts created bonds between settlements, which might otherwise have **lived jp** a **State** of semi-isolation. The third reason is the remarkable role of the Arochukwu group in the political, religious and economic life of the Igbo. It was the Aro people of the middle Cross River State who monopolized the slave-carrying trade to the City-States of the central and eastern Niger Delta.

### Problem of Naming: Ibo or Igbo?

There is always that confusion to the real name of this great and all important race. Some call them Tbos' and others 'Igbos'. The question to be answered here is which of the two names is correct and acceptable to the people?

The !o' J (not Igbos) came from a province of Judah called Schechenigbo. It is a man known as Jabborigbo that led the Schechenigboians out of Judah to become a tribe in Nigeria. The word Igbo was derived either from the name of the Schechenigboian leader - Jabborigbo or from their province of origin - Schechenigbo. From the above point of view the word Igbo, which stands both for a race and language, seems more correct from the above etymological concept.

On the other hand, the word Tbo' according to Alaezi (1999: 26) metamorphosed from Hebrew. The name Hebrew means 'the one passed over'. This name started with the man called Eber (1<sup>st</sup> Chronicl**he Nig'ya** **Academy Name** **Volume 7** **Number 1** **October 2006**); from Hebrew, he changed to Heebu and later to Heebo. From Heebo he changed to Eboe, and finally to Ibo.

The above chameleonic changes sound not only ridiculous but unreal and unacceptable. Rather than accepting this, it is better we embrace Edeh's (1985: 14) assertion that Ibo is frequently used by Europeans and other foreign writers. Their choice of this word is prompted by either or both of the following factors: first, they do not know that the correct word is Igbo. Secondly, they find the word Igbo more difficult to pronounce due to its compounded letters 'gb' and hence, they choose the easier way of using 'Ibo'.

Having looked at the introductory part of the history of the Igbo people, the rest of the discussion will concentrate on the origin of the people.

### **Igbo Origin**

There has existed an avalanche of guesswork and suggestions by the Igbo historians and ethnologists concerning the origin of the Igbo people. All that were said about the origin of the Igbo should be summarized only in two headings: The outside origin and aborigine motif.

### **Outside Origin**

This motif believes that the Igbo people came from somewhere to inhabit the areas where they are found today. Most people believe that the Igbo are of Jewish extraction. The first proponent of this view, as earlier stated, was an Igbo ex-slave called Olaudah Equiano. In his text, "The interesting narratives of the life of Olaudah Equiano" or "Gustavus Vassa the African" he advanced the theory that the Igbo originated from the Jews, basing his reasoning on ethnographic and sociocultural concepts. He argued that there were a lot of similarities in the cultures and beliefs of the Hebrews and those of the Igbo people. He anchored such similarities on the naming of a new-born child after what happened during his pregnancy, circumcision, kindness to visitors, system of worship, etc. The Igbo and the Hebrew observed the above cultures and also worship the same way. Equiano arrived at this conclusion after a thorough ethnographic study of the Igbo and the Hebrew people. To the modern historian, these reasons are not sufficient proof to claim that the Igbo are Jews (Nwadike, 2002: 3).

Edeh (1985: 10) opined that the Igbo came from Egypt down to the banks of the Niger. If this opinion is anything to go by, it then means that Igbo as Jews were not amongst those who followed Moses out of Egypt through Etham to Migdol route (Exod. 13: 20-14). The Egyptologists assert that there were three recorded migrations made by the Jews during the inglorious reigns of the Pharaoh "that did not know Joseph". Outside that of Moses which was recorded in scripture, the other two migrations made later were traceable only in history. The second migration was made through the Northern route, and the third migration was made through the central route. As the second and third migrations were not as popular as the first scripturally, their leaders were not publicized and therefore not known. It was doubtful if the second and third migrant Jews reached the Promised Land, or were they the lost tribe of Israel as described by Olaudah Equiano? Nwadike (P.3) averred that Equiano answered the question on the origin of the Igbo people by saying that "the Igbo are one of the lost tribes of Israel".

The migrant group(s) (could be only the first or all the three groups), on reaching the Promised Land, settled at Schechenigbo in Judah. They later moved out of Judah under the leadership of Jabborigbo, entered into Egypt, again, and down to the banks of the Niger.

According to Chukwumah (1994: 3) Mr. Innocent Okorie gave a new dimension to the history of origin of the Igbo people. Okorie is of the view that the Igbo are the Jews who fled from Israel following the persecution of the Israelites by Assyrians. They moved southwards through Hebron and Beersheba and arrived Cairo in 710 BC. They (Igbo) soon departed Egypt and journeyed on to their present habitat where they were joined by other exiles of the Jewish province of Habatea called the Effiikdonaelis or present day Effiks. The Igbo and Efik arrived first into Nigeria in 638 BC after the exile of the Israelites in 710 BC.

The entire Igbo never migrated into Nigeria one day. The Igbo who arrived very early are the Eri group (after Eri, the 5<sup>th</sup> son of Gad - Gen. 46: 16), the Aro group (after Arodi - Gen. 46: 16).

Many Igbo scholars are of the view that the Igbo people are from the Jews. Ogbalu (1981), Chukwuma (1994), Arinze (1974), Oraka (1983), Ezeala (1992) Ononuju (1996), Alaezi (1998) etc are in view of the above. These scholars, however, could not agree on the exact places of origin in Israel. Ezeala favoured Schechenigbo. This view has been contested against, so radically, by an ethno- linguist who supported his criticisms with Biblical quotations and dates. This scholar, Alaezi, holds that the Igbo in Nigeria are made up of Hebrew exile from different tribes of Israel and not from a particular tribe or place as Schechenigbo. He came up with tribal origins of many important Igbo towns. From the tribe of Eri we have Aguleri, Oraeri, Umuleri, Mbieri, Oweri, Nkwere, Umueri etc. From the tribe of Arodi we have Aro or Arochukwu, Arodi-lzuogu etc. From Etam we have Item. From Zebulun (the sixth son of Jacob or the father of the tribe of Zebulun Gen.46:14, 1 Chron.6:63) we have Ozubulu. From Ahab (derived from King Ahab of the tribe of Judah I King 19:1) we have Ahaba town in Abia State). From Amok (of the tribe of Levi, Neh 12:17) we have Amorka or Amoku (name of towns in Anambra, in Alayi, Abia and Rivers States) from Asa Abba (Asa from King Asa of the tribe of Judah 1 King 15:1. Abba is a common Hebrew name in Israel) we have Asaba (in Delta state ). From Arba (the fore father of Anak of the tribe of Judah, Joshua: 15:13) we have Aba (a town in Abia State). From Nekoda (Ezra 2: 48) we have Nekede (a town in Oweri, Imo State). From Oha Ophra (Oha means Community and Ophra the descendant of Ophra from the tribe of Judah 1 Chron. 4:13) we derive Ohafia (in Abia State). From Uhu (descendants of Hur, 1 Chron. 2: 19) we have Uhu (in Mbaukwu, Awka South LGA of Anambra State). From Uri (1Chron.2:20) we derive TJli (a town in Anambra State). In many cases ‘r’ is pronounced as T in Anambra Igbo. From Zariah (of the tribe Levi, 1 Chron.6:9) we arrived at the following towns: Ozara (in Enugu and Ebonyi) Ohuozara (in Imo) and Ozaraegbelu (in Abia State). From Aram (1 Chron. 7:34) we realized Umuarium (Abia State). From Arem (1Chron. 7: 34) and Isaachar (Gen. 46: 13) we have Ariam Issaku (in Ikwuano near Umuahia - Abia State). From Ahira (or the tribe of Nephtali - Numbers 7: 28) we have Ahiara (town in Mbaisc, Jmo State). From Ahaz (King, 2Kings 16:1) we have Ahiazu (in Mbaisc). From Akan (an Edomite, 1Chron. 1:42) we have Akanu (in Abia State). From Eker Ezer (of the tribe of Judah: 1Chron. 2: 27) we have Akaeze (Ebonyi State). From Ahlai (in Judah: 1Chron. 2:31) we have Allayi (in Abia State). From Izhar (of the tribe of Levi - 1 Chron. 6:2) we have Izza (in Ebonyi State). From Uzzi (of the tribe of Levi, 1Chron. 6:5) we have Izzi (in Ebonyi) and Uzzi; (in Imo). From Nob (town in ancient Israel - 1 Sam. 21: 1) we realized Nnobi (in Anambra State) etc.

The movement into Nigeria by the exiled Hebrews was as a result of God’s curse upon the Israelites for disobeying Him. King Salmanzar V of Assyria defeated Israel and drove away the inhabitants after rendering the entire land desolate. The next scattering of the Hebrew with God’s plan was by the Babylonians under King Nebuchadnezzar, first in 536 BC and the second in 586 BC (Alaezi, P. 31). The last Gentile power used by God to scatter His people Israel for disobeying Him was the Roman Empire. In AD 70, the Roman General (Titus) drove away the remaining two tribes of Israel (Judah and Benjamin) on final fulfillment of the God’s curse on them (Deut. 28, Ezek. 23). With this last scattering exercise by the Romans, about 700,000 Hebrews found themselves back to Egypt. From Egypt they moved down to Tunisia, Syria, Iraq, Morocco, Lybia, Sudan and to sub-Saharan Africa; settling in their largest number in Nigeria. This movement took them about eighty years, that is twice the duration of exodus from Egypt to Canaan.

As seen above, some of the Igbo towns bore the names of the leaders who took them to their places of settlement. Others bear the names which still remind them of their places of origin. Furthermore, some names of most Igbo towns connote either curses or mere description of their thought, circumstances, situation, mood or disposition. To buttress this point let us look at the names of the following Igbo towns:

### **Onitsha**

Alaezi (1999) says that the Hebrew word ‘Oni’ means oppression and affliction, while ‘shaa’ means to become desolate or to be laid waste. Onitsha is believed to have, ab-initio, settled in Bini. Edeh (1985: 10) is in view of this fact. He averred that the Onitsha-Igbo had a Bini origin. Later in their life the ruling Oba had no break of sweat in oppressing and afflicting them; and the climax was his sacking them out of Bini. This migrant group (Onitsha) suffered a great waste in terms of manpower and property. Thus, the name of Onitsha, as we see it today, is a reflection of their ugly experiences in the course of their struggle for a settled life

## **Akabo**

The Hebrew word akab from where Akabo was derived means to deceive or to take by force. Akabo is therefore the expression of what the people suffered as a migrant group. They suffered deceit, and most of the properties taken by force. As a result, the present Akabo people are very careful with whatever property they have that they rarely give any out. This attitude which is coloured by their past experience has provoked this acronym “Akabo Nyekwa gi, ami, ehi” amongst the Igbo. This shows that it is easier for the head of a Camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for an Akabo indigene to give out anything belonging to him.

## **Agboror Abor**

This migrant group, like Onitsha, was forced out of Bini. On settling down they adopted the name Agbor which in Hebrew word means “cross over from the danger”. Actually, they managed to cross over from the danger zone of Bini. Agbor group also settled at Abor-Mbaise, Abor-Omega, Abor-Achi, Abor-Enugu Agu etc. Whenever there was an incident of such “cross over” from one Heebo (Igbo) settlement area to another, they used the word ‘Abor’ together with the name of the town (Alaezi, 1999: 76).

## **The Aborigine Motif**

The above proofs and claims about the Igbo affinity with the Hebrews notwithstanding, many people, including some eminent scholars of Igbo origin, still disapprove the orientalist view of the origin of the Igbo people. Such people vehemently preach that the history of the Igbo origin should not be sourced from outside Nigeria, but rather they developed independently like other indigenous African people. According to P. I. Okwesili (Diara, 2001: 19) in his essay titled: “Comparative Study of Priesthood Israelite and Igbo Religions” reproduced in “Socio-Philosophical Perspective of African Traditional Religion” the Igbo and the Hebrews have no real relationship. He categorically states: Socio-culturally there is no relationship between the Israelites and the Igbo.

Historically, the Igbo had occupied at least the Nsukka-Okigwe cuesta and Awka-Orlu highlands by the third millennium BC. Israel herself came into existence as a people by the end of second millennium B.C. Before the saine covenants the Hebrews (Israelites) were still semi-nomads moving forth and back in small family groups between the fertile lands and desert fringes...

Further evidence for the improbability of the outside origin tradition was enunciated by M.C. English, a former education officer in Nigeria (Edeh, 1985:12-13). Discussing the possibility of a migration from the Sahara, he maintained that when the Sahara dried up and became a desert at the end of the Stone Age, people moved from the Sahara to the North and South of Africa. But by that time Nigeria was already inhabited. Jones and Mulball (Edeh P.13) maintained that Igbo did not migrate from other parts of Africa.

An elderly and experienced man in Umuawulu (Awka-South Local Government Area of Anambra State) H.R.II. Igwe G. C. Igboamazu maintained in a very strong term that the Igbo people were not part of the migrant groups in Nigeria. He said:

Ndi Igbo emvehc nka ha shi bia, Nna m agwaha m na nd Igbob al ab a.  
Any m l am fuo efuo n’ w wa nnyamvu a. (Igbo people did not come from anywhere. My father never told me that the Igbo are visitors in Nigeria. God created and planted us in this eastern part of Nigeria).

Mr. Okenegbu of Awgbu, Okoye Agiliga of Umuawulu are in view of the above claim. An elder from Mbaise, according to Nwadike (2002:6) is equally in view of the above. The elder bluntly asserts “we did not come from anywhere, and anyone who tells you we come from anywhere is a liar. Write it down”.

The archeological discovery of Professor Thurstan Shaw of the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ibadan and that of Professor Hartle of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka and the research of Professor Onwuejeogwu (an Igbo ethnologist) add to the credibility of the above assertion. P. O. Achebe, an Igbo theologian had, in his part, argued that there had been a continuous occupation of Igbo Land for at least 3,000 years. He made this conclusion after going through the results of the works of Shaw, Hartle and nw ejeogwu.

### Summary

Igbo as migrant group are believed to be the lost tribe of Israel, who either started their migration from Schechenigbo in Judah, under the leadership of Jabborigbo, or from various tribes of Judah. To prove the fact, we realized that virtually all the names of the towns in Igbo land are the corrupt forms of the towns in Israel, names of Israelites or coined using Hebrew words to reflect the mood, circumstance, experience etc of the people in the course of their migration. There is also the Niger-Benue confluence theory which says that the Igbo migrated from the confluence to occupy the towns in which they are inhabiting today.

We equally have the aborigine motif which says that the Igbo never migrated from anywhere but were created and planted in Eastern Nigeria from the dawn of history.

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