A History of the Igbo Language

compiled by Frances W. Pritchett

pre-1500s == A form of writing called *nsibidi*, using formalized pictograms, existed among the Igbo and neighboring groups. It died out, probably because it was popular among secret societies whose members did not want to discuss it publicly. In 1904, T. D. Maxwell, Acting District Commissioner in Calabar, was the first European to learn about the existence of *nsibidi*. Apart from *nsibidi* writing, the Igbo acculturated themselves effectively by informal methods (Oraka pp. 13,17).

THE ISUAMA IGBO STUDIES (1766-1900)

1500s-1700s == Inhuman slave trade forced Africans to North America and West Indies.
1766-1900 == Isuama Igbo studies period. Isuama Igbo: type of dialect used in Igbo studies as a standard dialect by emancipated slaves of Igbo origin settled in Sierra Leone and Fernando Po (now part of Equatorial Guinea) in the 1800s (Oraka p. 20).

c.1766 == G. C. A. Oldendorp, a German missionary of the Moravian Brethren, went to their West Indies Caribbean mission (Oraka p. 20).

1777 == Oldendorp produced a book, *Geschichte der Mission der Evangelischen Bruder auf den Carabischen* (History of the Evangelistic Mission of the Brothers in the Caribbean). It contained a few Igbo words, numerals, 13 nouns, 2 sentences. Thus he was the first to publish any material in Igbo (Oraka p. 21).

late 1700s-early 1800s == Igbo language study transferred from the West Indies and London to Freetown, Sierra Leone, and Fernando Po, because freed slaves were settled there, the larger number in Freetown (Oraka p. 65).

1828 == Mrs. Hannah Kilham, a Quaker mission teacher, published *Specimens of African Languages Spoken in the Colony of Sierra-Leone*. Included: Igbo numerals and some 50 Igbo nouns (Oraka p. 22).

1831 == Mrs. Kilham started a girls’ school at Charlotte village, Sierra Leone. Formal education in vernacular languages is begun (Oraka p. 22).

1837 == MacGregor Laird published the wordlist he collected inside the Igbo homeland during the Niger Expedition of 1832-34 (Oraka p. 22).

1840 == Jacob Friedrich Schon, German missionary, reported that he had collected 1600 words in the Igbo language. His report remained unpublished (Oraka p. 22).
1841 == Edwin Norris, Assistant Secretary, Royal Asiatic Society, compiled wordlists from West and Central African languages to use in Niger expeditions. He used Laird's 70 words and others from two unknown sources (a manuscript, and an Igbo living in London) (Oraka p. 22).

1841 == Another Norris expedition on the Niger. He took two missionary linguists from the staff of the CMS (Church Missionary Society) in Freetown, J. F. Schon and Samuel Ajayi Crowther (the latter a Yoruba-born ex-slave and teacher), along with twelve interpreters, including Igbo who came from emancipated slave families settled in Freetown. John Christopher Taylor and Simon Jonas were among these. No permanent mission was founded. Schon was interested in Igbo and Hausa. At a stopover in Aboh, he tried to communicate in Igbo but was disappointed that people did not understand him. He then abandoned Igbo study for some twenty years (Oraka p. 23).
1843-48 == Morrick (missionary in Fernando Po) and John Clarke, Baptist missionary, together collected vocabularies of African languages. Clarke published them in 1848, including 250 words and a few numerals written in Igbo. 24 Igbo dialects were represented, including Aro, Bonny, Ndoli and Agbaja (Oraka p. 24).

1854 == Lepsius, German philologist, produced international "Standard Alphabet" for all world languages to use (Oraka p. 25).

1854 == S. W. Koelle, German missionary, published Polyglotta Africana, with a vocabulary gathered from liberated slaves in Sierra Leone. Contained some 300 Igbo words representing five dialects: Isoama, Isiele, Agbaja, Aro, Mbofia (Oraka p. 23).

1856 == Crowther and Jonas stayed together in Lagos, where Jonas taught his master Igbo (Oraka p. 24).

1857 == Crowther produced the first book in Igbo, with Jonas's help. **Isoama-Ibo Primer** has 17 pages, with the Igbo alphabet, words, phrases, sentence patterns, the
Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, and translations of the first chapters of Matthew's Gospel. Thus Crowther became the first to use the Lepsius "Standard Alphabet" (Oraka p. 25).

1857 == Dr. William Baikie's ship berthed at Onitsha. On board were Crowther and his missionary team, including Igbo speakers Simon Jonas and Rev. J. C. Taylor. Crowther established a mission and left it in Taylor's hands. In less than a week Taylor had opened a school for young girls. Isoama-Ibo Primer served as their textbook (Oraka p. 25).

1861 == J. F. Schon apparently resumed Igbo studies, publishing his Oku Ibo: Grammatical Elements of the Ibo Language, written in the Isuama dialect, using Lepsius orthography (Oraka p. 26).

1870 == CMS in London used Lepsius orthography to publish An Ibo Primer, by F. W. Smart, a catechist posted in 1868 to the first outpost Christian Station in Niger Delta. Crowther, first Bishop of the Niger, posted him there with W. E. L. Carew. In the 1870s Smart and
Carew each published an Igbo Primer and carried out translation works on church liturgy (Oraka pp. 25-26).

1880s == Crowther thought his Niger Mission was collapsing, since the Igbo dialect he chose was not a "living" dialect spoken by a particular group of the Igbo. The CMS realized its mistakes and decided to give up its effort to use one dialect only (Oraka p. 27).

1882 == Crowther wrote **Vocabulary of the Ibo Language**, the first comprehensive dictionary in Igbo. In 1883 Crowther and Schon jointly revised it and added more words. They finally came out with **Vocabulary of the Ibo Language, Part II**, an English-Ibo dictionary. By this time, Igbo had had some 50 books and booklets published in it (Oraka p. 27).

1882 == Britain enacted the first education ordinance to control and direct educational activities of Christian missions in what later became her West African colonies. It provided grants-in-aid conditional on the teaching of reading and writing of the English language
only. This caused a stalemate in the development of many West African languages (Oraka p. 29).

1885 == RCM (Roman Catholic Mission) reached Igboland but did not seem to be interested in the study of the Igbo language (Oraka p. 28).

1891 == Bishop Crowther died (over 80), and the Isuama-Igbo period died with him. By this time two young men, the Englishman T. J. Dennis and the Sierra Leonean Henry Johnson, had joined the mission (Oraka p. 27).

1892 == Julius Spencer, an Onitsha-based Sierra Leonean missionary, published An Elementary Grammar of the Igbo Language. This was revised by Archdeacon Dennis in 1916 (Oraka p. 30).

THE UNION IGBO STUDIES (1900-1929)
1900-29 == Union Igbo Studies period. Refers to Igbo version developed by CMS, aimed at binding or writing all Igbo dialects. Used terms understood in Onitsha, Owerri, Unwana, Arochukwu and Bonny dialects, keeping idioms and proverbs common to all. Intended to be a sort of "central" or "compromise" Igbo, playing the role of a literary medium for the Igbo people. The most prominent work published in Union Igbo was the Holy Bible (Bible Nso). The Union Igbo period saw major translation works. Missionaries collected materials on Igbo culture, including proverbs, folktales, riddles and customs (Oraka pp. 28, 29).

1900-29 == Rev. Thomas J. Dennis was the best, most prolific student of Igbo and writer of his time. He used an Igbo Language Translation Committee, including Igbo indigenes, to translate Pilgrim's Progress and some catechisms into Igbo. He also translated the Union Reader and the Union Hymnal. He died in a shipwreck in 1917 (Oraka p. 28).
1904 == A. Gabot, French missionary, produced a trilingual dictionary, **English-Ibo and French Dictionary** (Oraka p. 30).

1905 == Niger Mission saw a need to adopt a compromise dialect if the Bible were to be translated into a generally understood Igbo. CMS sent Dennis from Onitsha to Owerri to see about locating the headquarters of Igbo language studies there. Went with Alphonsus Onyeabo, an Onitsha-born catechist who later became a bishop. Dennis reported that Egbu, near Owerri, would be the ideal site, because the purest Igbo dialect was spoken there. CMS approved. Dennis, Onyeabo, and T. D. Anyaegbunam went to Egbu and opened a station (Oraka p. 29).

1907 == P. C. Zappa, a French missionary, compiled a bilingual dictionary, **Essai de Dictionnaire Francais-Ibo ou Francais-Ika**, with the help of a catechist, Mr. Nwokeabia. Zappa rightly saw Ika as an Igbo dialect and not as a language in itself (Oraka p. 30).
1909 == Dennis and the others completed translation of the New Testament, the last part of their work. Lepsius orthography was used. Dennis replaced "ds," "ts" and "s" with "j," "ch" and "sh." Controversy ensued about the dialect used (Oraka p. 29).


1913-1914 == Northcote W. Thomas produced *Anthrological Report on the Igbo-Speaking People of Nigeria*, in 6 volumes. Part II and Part V were devoted to Igbo-English (based on Onitsha and Awka dialects) and English-Igbo (with many words from the western Igbo dialect of Asaba) dictionaries, respectively (Oraka p. 30).

1916 == Archdeacon Dennis revised and enlarged Spencer's 1892 grammar (Oraka p. 30).

1920 == Phelps-Stokes Fund (American philanthropic organization interested in education of world's black people) sponsored two commissions to Africa.
Subsequently (1922) it published *Report on Education in Africa: Study of West, South and Equatorial Africa*, recognizing the importance of the mother tongue in education of children (Oraka p. 31).

1923 == Isaac Iwekanuno wrote the first historical essay in the Igbo language, *Akuko Ala Obosi*, in Obosi dialect (Oraka p. 30).

1925 == The Phelps-Stokes Report prompted the British Colonial Office to set up an Advisory Committee on Native Education in its African colonies, stressing the importance of the vernaculars (Oraka p. 31).

1926 == The Education Ordinance and Code of 1926 was enacted, requiring that only the vernacular or English be media of instruction. The Board of Education in Nigeria was reorganized to conform to the provisions of the Ordinance. (Oraka pp. 32,33).

1926 == On June 29, 1926, linguists and others from Africa and Europe met in London and launched the
International Institute of African Languages and Cultures (Oraka p. 32).

1927 == IIALC published a pamphlet, **Practical Orthography of African Languages**. 8 vowels and 28 consonants, with "gw," "kw," and "nw" added for Igbo sounds. The pamphlet used some international phonetic symbols. This was a radical change from the Lepsius orthography used by CMS for nearly seventy years. It started a heated controversy that almost suspended Igbo studies for more than thirty years (Oraka pp. 32,34).

**THE GREAT ORTHOGRAPHY CONTROVERSY (1929-1961)**

1929 == IIALC member Prof. Westermann was invited to Nigeria to advise the Colonial Government on orthography for languages, including Igbo. He recommended the 1927 "Africa" orthography of the
The Board of Education agreed, and made efforts to replace the Lepsius orthography (Oraka p. 33).

1929 == The IIALC orthography became known as the "Adams-Ward" orthography because of two people in Eastern Nigeria who fought hard for its adoption: Mr. R. F. G. Adams, an Inspector of Education, and Dr. Ida C. Ward, a research linguist of the London School of Oriental and African Studies (Oraka p. 33).

1929 == The Protestant missions (except for the Methodists), led by the CMS (Anglican) and conservatives, opposed the "new" orthography, while the government, the Roman Catholic and Methodist missions adopted it. Thus the old came to be dubbed "CMS" orthography and the new the "Roman Catholic" orthography (Oraka p. 34).

1930 == An advisory committee that included members of the missions agreed to set up a Translation Bureau at Umuahia (Oraka p. 35).

1939 == A research expedition led by Dr. Ward, to examine some dialects for possible use as a widely-accepted literary medium. She thought this might form the basis of a growing "standard" Igbo. Her "central" Igbo covered Owerri and Umuahia area,s with special inclination toward Ohuhu dialect. It was gradually accepted by missionaries, writers, publishers, and Cambridge University (Oraka p. 35).
1944 == Adams arranged a series of three meetings to urge the adoption of both Ward's "central' dialect and the new orthography. The first meeting was in Umuahia 6/13/44, attended by 24 scholars, teachers, missionaries, and government officials. Its recommendations included acceptance of Ward's alphabet from her *Ibo Dialects and the Development of a Common Language* (Oraka p. 35).

1944 == Reactions: Anglicans stuck to the Union, Catholics insisted on the Onitsha dialect, Methodists embraced central dialect (Oraka p. 36).

1944 == June 26-27, the Ass't Director of Education at Enugu convened another meeting at Onitsha, attended by 27 persons from the above groups. All interest groups again stuck to their ideal dialects (Oraka p. 36).

1944 == Sept. 6, another meeting, at Enugu, attended by 16 persons, presided over by the Ass't Director of Education. It resolved that the "central" dialect would be compulsory only for literature connected with government (Oraka p. 36).
1948 == The Owerri Diocese of the Roman Catholic Mission was carved out of Onitsha Ecclesiastical Province, giving impetus to the RCM's growing practice of issuing readers in the two dialects of Onitsha and Central. But CMS, while accepting Central dialect which Ward saw as her "Union Igbo" under another name, resolved never to adopt the new orthography (Oraka p. 36).

THE EMERGENCE OF THE SPILC (1948-1972)

1948 == Frederick Chidozie Ogbalu, mission tutor at Dennis Memorial Grammar School, Onitsha, wrote a lengthy article in the Onitsha newspaper The Nigerian Spokesman, challenging the new orthography. Principal E. D. C. Clark of the DMGS reprimanded him for its nationalist flavor, a sensitive issue. Clark recommended
that he produce books in Igbo to convince people that the old orthography was best (Oraka pp. 36, 41).

1949 == After his transfer to St. Augustine's Grammar School, Nkwerre, Ogbalu used an existing association he had formed (Society for Promoting African Heritage) as a nucleus for the Society for Promoting Igbo Language and Culture (SPILC). One of his purposes was to fight the new orthography. Membership was at first limited to staff and students of St. Augustine's, but through its activities it soon was making an impact on Igbo people and led to a great turning point in the development of Igbo Studies (Oraka pp. 36, 41).

1950 == SPILC was formally inaugurated by a large percentage of the few educated Igbo men meeting at Dennis Memorial Grammar School chemistry lab, Onitsha. Officers appointed: President, Dr. Akanu Ibiam; 1st Vice-president, Dr. S. E. Onwu; 2nd Vice-president, Bishop John Cross Anyogu; Chairman, Mr. D. C. Erinne; Secretary, F. C. Ogbalu. The Central dialect was seen as an attempt to impose the white man's will.
A new battle line was drawn between Government, RCM, and Methodist Mission on one side and SPILC and CMS on the other. SPILC acquired a public character (Oraka pp. 36, 37, 41, 42).

1952 == By the early fifties, many patriotic Igbo worried about unresolved orthography question. The Government convened another conference at Aba. Mr. R. I. Uzoma, Eastern Nigeria Minister of Education, presided. SPILC strongly opposed the "new" orthography. No decision was reached (Oraka p. 39).

1953 == Aug. 25: a select committee, chaired by Dr. S. E. Onwu, met at Owerri to evolve a compromise orthography. The four phonetic symbols in the new orthography were removed, but the suggestion to replace them with diacritical marks was rejected. All parties except SPILC were either satisfied or no longer interested in contesting the issue (Oraka p. 39).

1954 == Another committee meeting, headed by Mr. Alvan Ikoku. SPILC presented a "modified"
orthography. It was rejected. SPILC members walked out on the meeting (Oraka p. 39).

1955 == F. C. Ogbalu issued his "compromise" orthography. Many other suggested orthographies were issued at different times by different groups and individuals. Controversy lingered until 1961, when the Government set up another committee, the Onwu Orthography Committee, chaired by Dr. S. E. Onwu, Assistant Director of Medical Services for Eastern Nigeria (Oraka p. 39).

1961 == Sept. 13: the eleven members of the Onwu Committee met at the W.T.C., Enugu. The Minister of Education warned them to reconsider use of diacritical marks, in line with SPILC recommendations. They produced a pacifying orthography using diacritical marks to distinguish "light" and "heavy' vowels which, with other recommendations, brought to an end the 32-year-old controversy. All parties were satisfied (Oraka pp. 34, 40). Here is that important text: *The Official Igbo
Orthography as recommended by the Onwu Committee in 1961.

1962 == In June, the Government ordered all school principals to see that all tutors and students acquainted themselves with the official orthography. All "must use it henceforth in the teaching and studying of the language" (Oraka p. 40). For more details about the membership, aims, objectives, and accomplishments of SPILC, see Oraka pp. 43 ff.

1968 == Igbo: A Learner's Manual, and Igbo: A Learner's Dictionary, were privately published by Prof. William E. Welmers and Beatrice F. Welmers. Welmers, now deceased, taught at the University of California at Los Angeles. Using what they call "compromise Igbo," and aiming to prepare U. S. Peace Corps members for work in Igboland, the authors have made a comprehensive presentation of Igbo in graded lessons, including tests, suggestions for teachers, and a great deal of accurate cultural material. These have been
the most helpful books to me in my studies.

THE STANDARD IGBO PERIOD (1972 - PRESENT)

1972 == SPILC set up its Standardization Committee. Its main objectives were to adopt words from different dialects of Igbo, whether or not they belonged to the "Central" dialect areas, for the purpose of enriching the Igbo language. It was also liberal with the adoption of loan words where there were no Igbo equivalents. Thus, Standard or Modern Igbo was designed to be spoken and understood by all, because it was more flexible than Isuama, Union or "Central" dialect. It was a cross-pollination and diffusion of dialects (Oraka p. 56).

1973 == August: SPILC approved the recommendation of its Standardization Committee about the spelling of Igbo words (Oraka p. 46).
1974 == By intensive obblying, SPILC brought about the establishment of the Dept. of Igbo Language and Culture at Alvan Ikoku College of Education (Oraka p. 48).

1976 == August: SPILC recommended the rearrangement of Igbo alphabet (Oraka p. 47).

1978 == The Department of Igbo Language and Culture was started, with the opening of Anambra State College of Education at Awka, with F. C. Ogbalu as Head of Department. In September, another Department of Igbo was established at Federal Advanced Teachers College, Okene, Kwara State (Oraka p. 48).

1999 == Chinua Achebe, the most internationally famous Igbo speaker, passionately denounced Standard Igbo, in a lecture sponsored by the Roman Catholic Archdiocese in Owerri.
The **Igbo people**, formerly known as the **Ibo**, are an ethnic group of southeastern Nigeria. They speak Igbo, which includes various Igbond languages and dialects. Igbo people are one of the largest ethnic groups in Africa.

In rural areas of Nigeria, Igbo people are mostly craftsmen, farmers and traders. The most important crop is the yam; celebrations are held annually to celebrate its harvesting. Other staple crops include cassava and taro.

Before British colonialism, the Igbo were a politically fragmented group. There were variations in culture such as in art styles, attire and religious practices. Various subgroups were organized by clan, lineage, village affiliation, and dialect. There were not many centralized chiefdoms, hereditary aristocracy, or kingship customs except in kingdoms such as those of the Nri, Arochukwu, Agbor and Onitsha. This political system changed significantly under British colonialism in the early 20th century; **Eze** (kings) were introduced into most local communities by Frederick Lugard as
"Warrant Chiefs". The Igbo became overwhelmingly Christian under colonization. Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is one of the most popular novels to depict Igbo culture and changes under colonialism.

By the mid-20th century, the Igbo people developed a strong sense of ethnic identity. Certain conflicts with other Nigerian ethnicities led to the Igbo-dominant Eastern Nigeria seceding to create the independent state of Biafra. The Nigerian-Biafran war (6 July 1967 – 15 January 1970) broke out shortly after. With their defeat, the Republic of Biafra was reabsorbed into Nigeria. MASSOB, a sectarian organization formed in 1999, continues a non-violent struggle for an independent Igbo state.

Due to the effects of migration and the Atlantic slave trade, there are descendant ethnic Igbo populations in countries such as Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea, as well as outside Africa. Their exact population outside Africa is unknown, but today many African Americans and Afro Caribbeans are of Igbo descent. According to
Liberian historians, the fifth president of that country, Edward James Roye, was of "pure" Igbo descent.

The Igbo people have had fragmented and politically independent communities. Before knowledge of Europeans and full exposure to other neighbouring ethnic groups, the Igbo did not have a strong identity as one people. As in the case of most ethnic groups, the British and fellow Europeans identified the Igbo as a tribe. Chinua Achebe, among other scholars, challenged this because of its negative connotations and possible wrong definition. He suggested defining the Igbo people as a nation similar to the Cherokee Native Americans or Japanese, although the Igbo do not have an officially recognized physical state of their own.

Due to the effects of migration and the Atlantic slave trade, there are descendant historical Igbo populations in countries such as Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea, as well as outside Africa; many African Americans and Afro Caribbeans are believed to be partially of Igbo descent.
The most common name for the Igbo in English was formerly "Ibo". They have also been known as the "Iboe", "Ebo", "Eboe", "Eboans", or "Heebo". Their territory and main settlement has often been known by their name as well.

**History**

**Origin**

Pottery dated at around 2500 BCE showing similarities with later Igbo work was found at Nsukka, along with pottery and tools at nearby Ibagwa; the traditions of the Umueri clan have as their source the Anambra valley. In the 1970s the Owerri, Okigwe, Orlu, Awgu, Udi and Awka divisions were determined to constitute "an Igbo heartland" from the linguistic and cultural evidence.

**Nri Kingdom**

The Nri people of Igbo land have a creation myth which is one of the many creation myths that exist in various parts of Igbo land. The Nri and Aguleri people are in the
territory of the Umueri clan who trace their lineages back to the patriarchal king-figure Eri. Eri's origins are unclear, though he has been described as a "sky being" sent by Chukwu (God). He has been characterized as having first given societal order to the people of Anambra. The historian Elizabeth Allo Isichei says "Nri and Aguleri and part of the Umueri clan, [are] a cluster of Igbo village groups which traces its origins to a sky being called Eri."

Archaeological evidence suggests that Nri hegemony in Igboland may go back as far as the 9th century, and royal burials have been unearthed dating to at least the 10th century. Eri, the god-like founder of Nri, is believed to have settled the region around 948 with other related Igbo cultures following after in the 13th century. The first Eze Nri (King of Nri) Ìfikuánim followed directly after him. According to Igbo oral tradition, his reign started in 1043. At least one historian puts Ìfikuánim's reign much later, around 1225 AD.
Each king traces his origin back to the founding ancestor, Eri. Each king is a ritual reproduction of Eri. The initiation rite of a new king shows that the ritual process of becoming Ezenri (Nri priest-king) follows closely the path traced by the hero in establishing the Nri kingdom.

E. Elochukwu Uzukwu

The Kingdom of Nri was a religio-polity, a sort of theocratic state, that developed in the central heartland of the Igbo region. The Nri had seven types of taboos which included human (such as the birth of twins), animal (such as killing or eating of pythons), object, temporal, behavioral, speech and place taboos. The rules regarding these taboos were used to educate and govern Nri's subjects. This meant that, while certain Igbo may have lived under different formal administration, all followers of the Igbo religion had to abide by the rules of the faith and obey its representative on earth, the Eze Nri.

Traditional society
Traditional Igbo political organization was based on a quasi-democratic republican system of government. In tight knit communities, this system guaranteed its citizens equality, as opposed to a feudalist system with a king ruling over subjects. This government system was witnessed by the Portuguese who first arrived and met with the Igbo people in the 15th century. With the exception of a few notable Igbo towns such as Onitsha, which had kings called Obi, and places like the Nri Kingdom and Arochukwu, which had priest kings; Igbo communities and area governments were overwhelmingly ruled solely by a republican consultative assembly of the common people. Communities were usually governed and administered by a council of elders.

Although title holders were respected because of their accomplishments and capabilities, they were never revered as kings, but often performed special functions given to them by such assemblies. This way of governing was immensely different from most other communities of Western Africa, and only shared by the
Ewe of Ghana. *Umunna* are a form of patrilineage maintained by the Igbo. Law starts with the *Umunna* which is a male line of descent from a founding ancestor (who the line is sometimes named after) with groups of compounds containing closely related families headed by the eldest male member. The *Umunna* can be seen as the most important pillar of Igbo society.

Mathematics in traditional Igbo society is evident in their calendar, banking system and strategic betting game called *Okwe*. In their indigenous calendar, a week had four days, a month consisted of seven weeks and 13 months made a year. In the last month, an extra day was added. This calendar is still used in indigenous Igbo villages and towns to determine market days. They settled law matters via mediators, and their banking system for loans and savings, called Isusu, is also still used. The Igbo new year, starting with the month *Ọnwá Mbụ* (Igbo: *First Moon*) occurs on the third week of February, although the traditional start of the year for many Igbo communities is around springtime in *Ọnwá Ágwụ* (June). Used as a ceremonial script by secret
societies, the Igbo had a traditional ideographic set of symbols called Nsibidi, originating from the neighboring Ejagham people. Igbo people produced bronzes from as early as the 9th century, some of which have been found at the town of Igbo Ukwu, Anambra state.

A system of indentured servitude or slavery existed among the Igbo before and after the encounter with Europeans. Indentured service in Igbo areas was described by Olaudah Equiano in his memoir. He describes the conditions of the slaves in his community of Essaka, and points out the difference between the treatment of slaves under the Igbo in Essaka, and those in the custody of Europeans in West Indies:

…but how different was their condition from that of the slaves in the West Indies! With us, they do no more work than other members of the community,… even their master;… (except that they were not permitted to eat with those… free-born;) and there was scarce any other difference between them,… Some of these slaves
have… slaves under them as their own property… for their own use.

The Niger coast was an area of contact between African and European traders from the years 1434–1807. The Portuguese were the first traders, then the Dutch and finally the British. Prior to European contact, Igbo trade routes stretched as far as Mecca, Medina and Jeddah on the continent.

**Transatlantic slave trade**

The transatlantic slave trade, which took place between the 16th and late 19th centuries, had huge effects on the Igbo because so many young people were taken, and warfare increased for the taking of captives. Most Igbo slaves were taken from the Bight of Biafra (also known as the Bight of Bonny). This area included modern day southeastern Nigeria, Western Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea and parts of Northern Gabon. Major trade ports for goods and slaves in the area included Bonny and Calabar Town. A large number of slaves from the Bight of Biafra would have been Igbo. Slaves were usually
sold to Europeans by the Aro Confederacy, who kidnapped or bought slaves from Igbo villages in the hinterland. Most Igbo slaves were not victims of slave-raiding wars or expeditions, but were sometimes debtors and people who committed what their communities considered to be abominations or crimes. Igbo slaves were known to the British colonists as being rebellious and having a high rate of suicide to escape slavery. For still unknown reasons, there is evidence that traders sought Igbo women.

Contrary to common belief, European slave traders were fairly informed about various African ethnicities, leading to slavers' targeting certain ethnic groups which plantation owners preferred. Particular desired ethnic groups consequently became fairly concentrated in certain parts of the Americas. The Igbo were dispersed to colonies such as Jamaica, Cuba, Saint-Domingue, Barbados, the United States, Belize and Trinidad and Tobago, among others.
Elements of Igbo culture can still be found in these places. For example, in Jamaican Patois, the Igbo word *unu*, meaning "you" plural, is still used. "Red Ibo" (or "red eboe") describes a black person with fair or "yellowish" skin. This term had originated from the reported prevalence of these skin tones among the Igbo but eastern Nigerian influences may not be strictly Igbo. The word *Bim*, a colloquial term for Barbados, was commonly used among enslaved Barbadians (Bajans). This word is said to have derived from *bi mu* in the Igbo language (or *bem*, *Ndi bem*, *Nwanyi ibem* or *Nwoke ibem*, which means "My people"), but may have other origins (see: Barbados etymology). A section of Belize City was named *Eboe Town* after its Igbo inhabitants. In the United States, the Igbo were imported most commonly to the Chesapeake Bay colonies and states of Maryland and Virginia, where they constituted the largest group of Africans. Since the late 20th century, a wave of Nigerian immigrants, mostly English and Igbo-speaking, have settled in Maryland, attracted to its strong professional job market.
Colonial period

The 19th-century British colonization effort in present-day Nigeria and increased encounters between the Igbo and other ethnicities near the Niger River led to a deepening sense of a distinct Igbo ethnic identity. The Igbo proved remarkably decisive and enthusiastic in their embrace of Christianity and Western education. Due to the incompatibility of the Igbo decentralized style of government and the centralized system required for British indirect rule, British colonial rule was marked with open conflicts and much tension. Under British colonial rule, the diversity within each of Nigeria's major ethnic groups slowly decreased and distinctions between the Igbo and other large ethnic groups, such as the Hausa and the Yoruba, became sharper.

Colonial rule drastically transformed Igbo society, as portrayed in Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart*. British rule brought about changes in culture, such as the introduction of Warrant Chiefs as Eze (traditional rulers) where there were no such monarchies. Christian
missionaries introduced European ideology into Igbo society and culture, sometimes shunning parts of the culture. The rumours that the Igbo women were being assessed for taxation sparked off the 1929 Igbo Women's War in Aba (also known as the 1929 Aba Riots), a massive revolt of women never encountered before in Igbo history.

Living conditions changed under colonial rule. The tradition of building houses out of mud walls and thatched roofs ended as the people shifted to materials such as cement blocks for houses and zinc roofs. Roads for vehicles were built. Buildings such as hospitals and schools were erected in many parts of Igboland. Along with these changes, electricity and running water were installed in the early 20th century. With electricity, new technology such as radios and televisions were adopted, and have become commonplace in most Igbo households.

**Nigerian–Biafran War**
A series of ethnic clashes between Northern Muslims and the Igbo, Ibibio, Efik and other ethnic groups of Eastern Nigeria Region living in Northern Nigeria took place between 1966 and 1967. Elements in the army had assassinated the Nigerian military head of state General Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsì (29 July 1966) and peace negotiations failed between the military government that deposed Ironsi and the regional government of Eastern Nigeria at the Aburi Talks in Ghana in 1967. These events led to a regional council of the peoples of Eastern Nigeria deciding that the region should secede and proclaim the Republic of Biafra on May 30, 1967. General Emeka Odumegwu-Ojukwu made this declaration and became the Head of state of the new republic. The resultant war, which became known as the Nigerian Civil War or the Nigerian-Biafran War, lasted from July 6, 1967 until January 15, 1970, after which the federal government re-absorbed Biafra into Nigeria. Several million Eastern Nigerians, especially Igbo, are believed to have died from the pogroms against them and the civil war. In their brief struggle for self-determination, the people of Biafra earned the respect of
figures such as Jean-Paul Sartre and John Lennon, who returned his British honor, MBE, partly in protest against British collusion in the Nigeria-Biafra war.

In July 2007 the former President of Biafra, General Emeka Odumegwu-Ojukwu, renewed calls for the secession of the Biafran state as a sovereign entity. "The only alternative is a separate existence...What upsets the Igbo population is we are not equally Nigerian as the others".

**Recent history (1970 to present)**

After the Nigerian–Biafran War, Igboland was devastated. Many hospitals, schools, and homes were completely destroyed in the war. In addition to the loss of their savings, many Igbo people were discriminated against by other ethnic groups and the new non-Igbo federal government. Some Igbo subgroups, such as the Ikwerre, started disassociating themselves from the larger Igbo population after the war. In the post-war era, people of eastern Nigeria changed the names of both people and places to non-Igbo-sounding words. For
instance, the town of Igbuzo was anglicized to *Ibusa*. Due to discrimination, many Igbo had trouble finding employment, and during the early 1970s, the Igbo became one of the poorest ethnic groups in Nigeria.

Igboland was gradually rebuilt over a period of twenty years and the economy was again prospering due to the rise of the petroleum industry in the adjacent Niger Delta region. This led to new factories being set up in southern Nigeria. Many Igbo people eventually took government positions, although many were engaged in private business. They still constitute the bulk of Nigerian informal economy. Since the early 21st century, there has been a wave of Nigerian Igbo immigration to other African countries, Europe, and the Americas.

**Culture**

Igbo culture includes the various customs, practices and traditions of the people. It comprises archaic practices as well as new concepts added into the Igbo culture either through evolution or outside influences. These customs and traditions include the Igbo people's visual art, music
and dance forms, as well as their attire, cuisine and language dialects. Because of their various subgroups, the variety of their culture is heightened further.

**Language and literature**

The Igbo language was used by John Goldsmith as an example to justify deviating from the classical linear model of phonology as laid out in *The Sound Pattern of English*. It is written in the Roman script as well as the Nsibidi formalized ideograms, which is used by the Ekpe society and Okonko fraternity, but is no longer widely used.\[106\] Nsibidi ideography existed among the Igbo before the 16th century, but died out after it became popular among secret societies, who made Nsibidi a secret form of communication. Igbo is a tonal language and there are hundreds of different Igbo dialects and Igboid languages, such as the Ikwerre and Ekpeye languages. In 1939, Dr. Ida C. Ward led a research expedition on Igbo dialects which could possibly be used as a basis of a standard Igbo dialect, also known as *Central Igbo*. This dialect included that of the Owerri
and Umuahia groups, including the Ohuhu dialect. This proposed dialect was gradually accepted by missionaries, writers, publishers, and Cambridge University.

In 1789, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* was published in London, England, written by Olaudah Equiano, a former slave. The book featured 79 Igbo words. In the first and second chapter, the book illustrates various aspects of Igbo life based on Olaudah Equiano's life in his hometown of Essaka. Although the book was one of the first books published to include Igbo material, *Geschichte der Mission der evangelischen Brüder auf den caribischen Inseln St. Thomas, St. Croix und S. Jan* (German: *History of the Evangelical Brothers' Mission in the Caribbean Islands St. Thomas, St. Croix and St. John*), published in 1777, written by the German missionary C. G. A. Oldendorp, was the first book to publish any Igbo material.

Perhaps the most popular and renowned novel that deals with the Igbo and their traditional life was the 1959 book by Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*. The novel
concerns influences of British colonialism and Christian missionaries on a traditional Igbo community during an unspecified time in the late nineteenth or early 20th century. Most of the novel is set in Umuofia, one of nine villages on the lower Niger.

**Performing arts**

The Igbo people have a musical style into which they incorporate various percussion instruments: the udu, which is essentially designed from a clay jug; an ekwe, which is formed from a hollowed log; and the ogene, a hand bell designed from forged iron. Other instruments include opi, a wind instrument similar to the flute, igba, and ichaka. Another popular musical form among the Igbo is Highlife. A widely popular musical genre in West Africa, Highlife is a fusion of jazz and traditional music. The modern Igbo Highlife is seen in the works of Dr Sir Warrior, Oliver De Coque, Bright Chimezie, and Chief Osita Osadebe, who were among the most popular Igbo Highlife musicians of the 20th century.
Masking is one of the most common art styles in Igboland and is linked strongly with Igbo traditional music. A mask can be made of wood or fabric, along with other materials including iron and vegetation. Masks have a variety of uses, mainly in social satires, religious rituals, secret society initiations (such as the Ekpe society) and public festivals, which now include Christmas time celebrations. Best known are the Agbogho Mmuo (Igbo: Maiden spirit) masks of the Northern Igbo which represent the spirits of deceased maidens and their mothers with masks symbolizing beauty.

Other impressive masks include Northern Igbo Ijele masks. At 12 feet (3.7 m) high, Ijele masks consist of platforms 6 feet (1.8 m) in diameter, supporting figures made of colored cloth and representing everyday scenes with objects such as leopards. Ijele masks are used for honoring the dead to ensure the continuity and well-being of the community and are only seen on rare occasions such as the death of a prominent figure in the community.
There are many Igbo dance styles, but perhaps, Igbo dance is best known for its Atilogwu dance troops. These performances include acrobatic stunts such as high kicks and cartwheels, with each rhythm from the traditional instruments indicating a movement to the dancer.

**Visual art and architecture**

There is such variety among Igbo groups that it is not possible to define a general Igbo art style. Igbo art is known for various types of masquerade, masks and outfits symbolising people animals or abstract conceptions. Bronze castings found in the town of Igbo Ukwu from the 9th century, constitute the earliest sculptures discovered in Igboland. Here, the grave of a well-established man of distinction and a ritual store, dating from the 9th century AD, contained both chased copper objects and elaborate castings of leaded bronze. Along with these bronzes were 165,000 glass beads said to have originated in Egypt, Venice and India. Some popular Igbo art styles include Uli designs. The majority
of the Igbo carve and use masks, although the function of masks vary from community to community.

**Igbo art is noted for Mbari architecture.**

Mbari houses of the Owerri-Igbo are large opened-sided square planned shelters. They house many life-sized, painted figures (sculpted in mud to appease the Alusi (deity) and Ala, the earth goddess, with other deities of thunder and water). Other sculptures are of officials, craftsmen, foreigners (mainly Europeans), animals, legendary creatures and ancestors. Mbari houses take years to build in what is regarded as a sacred process. When new ones are constructed, old ones are left to decay. Everyday houses were made of mud and thatched roofs with bare earth floors with carved design doors. Some houses had elaborate designs both in the interior and exterior. These designs could include Uli art designed by Igbo women.

One of the unique structures of Igbo culture was the Nsude Pyramids, at the town of Nsude, in Abaja' northern Igboland. Ten pyramidal structures were built
of clay/mud. The first base section was 60 ft. in circumference and 3 ft. in height. The next stack was 45 ft. in circumference. Circular stacks continued, till it reached the top. The structures were temples for the god Ala/Uto, who was believed to reside at the top. A stick was placed at the top to represent the god's residence. The structures were laid in groups of five parallel to each other. Because it was built of clay/mud like the Deffufa of Nubia, time has taken its toll requiring periodic reconstruction.

**Religion and rites of passage**

Today, the majority of the Igbo people are Christian, well over half of whom are Roman Catholic. There are a small population of Igbo Jews, who claim descent from ancient Jewish traders who married their women.

The ancient Igbo religion and traditions are known as Odinani.[25] In Igbo mythology, which is part of their ancient religion, the supreme God is called Chukwu ("great spirit"); Chukwu created the world and everything in it and is associated with all things on
Earth. Chukwu is a solar deity. To the ancient Igbo, the Cosmos was divided into four complex parts: creation, known as Okike; supernatural forces or deities called Alusi; Mmuo, which are spirits; and Uwa, the world.

Chukwu is the supreme deity in Odinani as he is the creator, and the Igbo people believe that all things come from him and that everything on earth, heaven and the rest of the spiritual world is under his control. Linguistic studies of the Igbo language suggests the name Chukwu is a portmanteau of the Igbo words: Chi (spiritual being) and Ukwu (great in size). Alusi, alternatively known as Arusi or Arushi (depending on dialect), are minor deities that are worshiped and served in Odinani. There are many different Alusi, each with its own purpose. When an individual deity is no longer needed, or becomes too violent, it is discarded.

The Igbo believe in reincarnation. People are believed to reincarnate into families that they were part of while alive. Before a relative dies, it is said that the soon to be deceased relative sometimes give clues of who they will
reincarnate as in the family. Once a child is born, he or she is believed to give signs of who they have reincarnated from. This can be through behavior, physical traits and statements by the child. A diviner can help in detecting who the child has reincarnated from. It is considered an insult if a male is said to have reincarnated as a female.

Children are not allowed to call elders by their names without using an honorific (as this is considered disrespectful). As a sign of respect, children are required to greet elders when seeing them for the first time in the day. Children usually add the Igbo honorifics *Mazi* or *Dede* before an elder's name when addressing them.

**Burials**

After a death, the body of a prominent member of society is placed on a stool in a sitting posture and is clothed in the deceased's finest garments. Animal sacrifices may be offered and the dead person is well perfumed. Burial usually follows within 24 hours of death. In the 21st century, the head of a home is usually
buried within the compound of his residence. Different types of deaths warrant different types of burials. This is determined by an individual's age, gender and status in society. For example, children are buried in hiding and out of sight; their burials usually take place in the early mornings and late nights. A simple untitled man is buried in front of his house and a simple mother is buried in her place of origin: in a garden or a farm-area that belonged to her father. In the 21st century, a majority of the Igbo bury their dead in the western way, although it is not uncommon for burials to be practiced in the traditional Igbo ways.

**Marriage**

The process of marrying usually involves asking the young woman's consent, introducing the woman to the man's family and the same for the man to the woman's family, testing the bride's character, checking the woman's family background, and paying the brides' wealth. Sometimes marriages had been arranged from birth through negotiation of the two families.
In the past, many Igbo men practiced polygamy. The polygamous family is made up of a man and his wives and all their children. Men sometimes married multiple wives for economic reasons so as to have more people in the family, including children, to help on farms. Christian and civil marriages have changed the Igbo family since colonization. Igbo people now tend to enter monogamous courtships and create nuclear families, mainly because of Western influence. Some Western marriage customs, such as weddings in a church, take place after the Igbo cultural traditional marriage.

**Attire**

Traditionally, the attire of the Igbo generally consisted of little clothing, as the purpose of clothing originally was simply to conceal private parts, although elders were fully clothed. Children were usually nude from birth until they reach puberty status (the time when they were considered to have something to hide), but sometimes ornaments such as beads were worn around the waist for spiritual reasons. Uli body art was used to decorate both
men and women in the form of lines forming patterns and shapes on the body.

Women traditionally carry their babies on their backs with a strip of clothing binding the two with a knot at her chest, a practice used by many ethnic groups across Africa. This method has been modernized in the form of the child carrier. In most cases, Igbo women did not cover their breast areas. Maidens usually wore a short wrapper with beads around their waist and other ornaments such as necklaces and beads. Both men and women wore wrappers. Men would wear loin cloths that wrapped round their waist and between their legs to be fastened at their back, the type of clothing appropriate for the intense heat as well as jobs such as farming.

In Olaudah Equiano's narrative, Equiano describes fragrances that were used by the Igbo in the community of Essaka;

"Our principal luxury is in perfumes; one sort of these is an odoriferous wood of delicious fragrance: the other a kind of earth; a small portion of which thrown into the
fire diffuses a most powerful odor. We beat this wood into powder, and mix it with palm oil; with which both men and women perfume themselves."

Olaudah Equiano

As colonialism became more influential, the Igbo adapted their dress customs. Clothing worn before colonialism became considered "traditional" and worn on special occasions. Modern Igbo traditional attire, for men, is generally made up of the Isiagu top, which resembles the Dashiki worn by other African groups. Isiagu (or Ishi agu) is usually patterned with lions' heads embroidered over the clothing and can be a plain color. It is worn with trousers and can be worn with either a traditional title holders hat or with the traditional Igbo striped men's hat known as Okpu Agwu. For women, a puffed sleeve blouse along with two wrappers and a head tie are worn.

Cuisine

The yam is very important to the Igbo as the staple crop. There are celebrations such as the New yam festival
(Igbo: *Iwaji*) which are held for the harvesting of the yam. During the festival, yam is eaten throughout the communities as celebration. Yam tubers are shown off by individuals as a sign of success and wealth. Rice has replaced yam for ceremonial occasions. Other foods include cassava, garri, maize and plantains. Soups or stews are included in a typical meal, prepared with a vegetable (such as okra, of which the word derives from the Igbo language, Okwuru) to which pieces of fish, chicken, beef, or goat meat are added. Jollof rice is popular throughout West Africa. Palm wine is a popular alcoholic beverage among the Igbo.

**Demographics**

The Igbo in Nigeria are found in Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, Imo, Delta and Rivers State. The Igbo language is predominant throughout these areas, although Nigerian English (the national language) is spoken as well. Prominent towns and cities in Igboland include Aba, Umuahia, Enugu (considered the 'Igbo capital'), Nsukka, Onitsha, Nnewi, Awka, Abakaliki,
Afikpo, Owerri, Orlu, Okigwe, Agbor, Asaba and Port Harcourt among others. A significant number of Igbo people have migrated to other parts of Nigeria, such as the city of Lagos.

The official population count of ethnic groups in Nigeria continues to be controversial as a majority of these groups have claimed that the government deliberately deflates the official population of one group, to give the other numerical superiority. The 2010 edition of the CIA World Factbook put the Igbo population (including the various subgroups of the Igbo) at 18% of a total population of 152 million, or approximately 27 million.

The 2013 edition of the CIA World Factbook places them at 23.5%, now with a Nigerian Population estimate of 170 million. So that if this is appropriate, the Igbo population will be approximately 40 million.

Southeastern Nigeria, which is inhabited primarily by the Igbo, is the most densely populated area in Nigeria, and possibly in all of Africa. Most ethnicities that inhabit southeastern Nigeria, such as the closely related Efik and
Ibibio people, are sometimes regarded as Igbo by other Nigerians and ethnographers who are not well informed about the southeast.

**Diaspora**

See also: Nigerian diaspora, Igbo American, Nigerian American and Nigerian British

After the Nigerian-Biafran War, many Igbo people emigrated out of the traditional Igbo homeland in southeastern Nigeria due to an absence of federal presence, lack of jobs, and poor infrastructure. In recent decades the Igbo region of Nigeria has suffered from frequent environmental damage mainly related to the oil industry. Igbo people have moved to both Nigerian cities such as Lagos and Abuja, and other countries such as Gabon, Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States. Prominent Igbo communities outside Africa include those of London in the United Kingdom and Houston, Baltimore, Chicago, Detroit, Atlanta, and Washington, D.C. in the United States.
About 21,000 Igbo people were recorded in Ghana in 1969. A small number (8,680) in Bioko island in 2002.

Small numbers live in Japan making up the majority of the Nigerian immigrant population based in Tokyo Other Igbo immigrants are found in the Americas (Igbo Canadian, Igbo American, Igbo Jamaican) and elsewhere.

**Population genetics and the African diaspora**

With genealogy tracing by means of DNA testing, the roots of the African diaspora is being uncovered by descendants of the victims of the Atlantic slave trade who are researching their family history. In the 2003 PBS program *African American Lives*, Bishop T.D. Jakes had his DNA analyzed; his Y chromosome showed that he is descended from the Igbo. American actors Forest Whitaker, Paul Robeson, and Blair Underwood have traced their genealogy back to the Igbo people.

**Genetics**
Genetic studies have shown the Igbo to cluster most closely with other Niger-Congo-speaking peoples, especially the Yoruba.

**Organizations**

The 1930s saw the rise of Igbo unions in the cities of Lagos and Port Harcourt. Later, the Ibo Federal Union (renamed the Ibo State Union in 1948) emerged as an umbrella pan-ethnic organization. Headed by Nnamdi Azikiwe, it was closely associated with the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC), which he co-founded with Herbert Macaulay. The aim of the organization was the improvement and advancement (such as in education) of the Igbo and their indigenous land and included an Igbo "national anthem" with a plan for an Igbo bank.

In 1978 after Olusegun Obasanjo's military regime lifted the ban on independent political activity, the Ohaneze Ndi Igbo organization was formed, an elite umbrella organization which speaks on behalf of the Igbo people. Their main concerns are the marginalization of the Igbo
people in Nigerian politics and the neglect of indigenous Igbo territory in social amenities and development of infrastructure. Other groups which protest the perceived marginalization of the Igbo people are the Igbo Peoples Congress (IPC). Even before the 20th century there were numerous Igbo unions and organizations existing around the world, such as the Igbo union in Bathurst, Gambia in 1842, founded by a prominent Igbo trader and ex-soldier named Thomas Refell. Another was the union founded by the Igbo community in Freetown, Sierra Leone by 1860, of which Africanus Horton, a surgeon, scientist and soldier, was an active member.

Decades after the Nigerian-Biafran war, the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), a secessionist group, was founded in September 1999 by Ralph Uwazurike for the goal of an independent Igbo state. Since its creation, there have been several conflicts between its members and the Nigerian government, resulting in the death of members. For the promotion of the Igbo language and culture, the Society for Promoting Igbo Language and Culture
(SPILC) was founded in 1949 by Frederick Chidozie Ogbalu, and has since created a standard dialect for Igbo.
IGBO LANGUAGE

Igbo, is the principal native language of the Igbo people, an ethnic group of southeastern Nigeria. There are approximately 24 million speakers, who live mostly in Nigeria and are primarily of Igbo descent. Igbo is written in the Latin script, which was introduced by British colonialists. There are over 20 Igbo dialects. There is apparently a degree of dialect leveling occurring. A standard literary language was developed in 1972 based on the Owerri (Isuama) and Umuahia (such as Ohuhu) dialects, though it omits the nasalization and aspiration of those varieties. There are related Igboid languages as well that are sometimes considered dialects of Igbo, the most divergent being Ekpeye. Some of these, such as Ika, have separate standard forms. Igbo is also a recognised minority language of Equatorial Guinea.

History

The first book to publish Igbo words was History of the Mission of the Evangelical Brothers in the Caribbean (German: Geschichte der Mission der Evangelischen
Brüder auf den Carabischen Inseln), published in 1777. Shortly afterwards in 1789, The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano was published in London, England, written by Olaudah Equiano, a former slave, featuring 79 Igbo words. The narrative also illustrated various aspects of Igbo life based in detail, based on Olaudah Equiano's experiences in his hometown of Essaka.

*Things Fall Apart* is a novel written by Nigerian Chinua Achebe published in 1958. The novel depicts influences of British colonialism and Christian missionaries on a traditional Igbo community during an unspecified time in the late 19th or early 20th century. The bulk of the novel takes place in Umuofia, one of nine villages on the lower River Niger in Igbo land southeastern Nigeria. It is possibly the most popular and renowned novel that deals with the Igbo and their traditional life.

Central Igbo, the dialect form gaining widest acceptance, is based on the dialects of two members of the Ezinihitte group of Igbo in Central Owerri Province between the
towns of Owerri and Umuahia, Eastern Nigeria. From its proposal as a literary form in 1939 by Dr. Ida C. Ward, it was gradually accepted by missionaries, writers, and publishers across the region. In 1972, the Society for Promoting Igbo Language and Culture (SPILC), a nationalist organisation which saw Central Igbo as an imperialist exercise, set up a Standardisation Committee to extend Central Igbo to be a more inclusive language. Standard Igbo aims to cross-pollinate Central Igbo with words from Igbo dialects from outside the "Central" areas, and with the adoption of loan words.

**Vocabulary**

Igbo has an extremely limited number of adjectives in a closed class. Emenanjo (1978) counts just eight: *ukwu* 'big', *nta* 'small'; *oji* 'dark', *ọcha* 'light'; *ọhụrụ* 'new', *ochie* 'old'; *ọma* 'good'; *ọjọọ* 'bad'. (Payne 1990)

Many names in Igbo are actually fusions of older original words and phrases. For example, one Igbo word for vegetable leaves is *akwụkwọ nri*, which literally means "leaves for eating" or "vegetables". Green leaves
are called *akwụkwọ ndụ*, because *ndụ* means "life". Another example is train (*ụgbọ igwe*), which comes from the words *ụgbọ* (vehicle, craft) and *igwe* (iron, metal); thus a locomotive train is vehicle via iron (rails); a car, *ụgbọ ala*; vehicle via land and an aeroplane *ụgbọ elu*; *vehicle via air*. Words may also take on multiple meanings. Take for example the word *akwụkwọ*. *Akwụkwọ* originally means "leaf" (as on a tree), but during and after the colonization period, *akwụkwọ* also came to be linked to "paper," "book," "school," and "education", to become respectively *akwụkwọ édémédé*, *akwụkwọ ọgụgu*, *ụlọ akwụkwọ*, *mmụta akwụkwọ*. This is because printed paper can be first linked to an organic leaf, and then the paper to a book, the book to a school, and so on. Combined with other words, *akwụkwọ* can take on many forms; for example, *akwụkwọ ego* means "printed money" or "bank notes," and *akwụkwọ ejị éjé njem* means "passport."

**Proverbs**
Proverbs and idiomatic (ilu in Igbo) expressions are highly valued by the Igbo people and proficiency in the language means knowing how to intersperse speech with a good dose of proverbs. Chinua Achebe (in *Things Fall Apart*) describes proverbs as "the palm oil with which words are eaten". Proverbs are widely used in the traditional society to describe, in very few words, what could have otherwise required a thousand words. Proverbs may also become euphemistic means of making certain expressions in the Igbo society, thus the Igbo have come to typically rely on this as avenues of certain expressions.

Igbo is a tonal language with two distinctive tones, high and low. In some cases a third, down stepped high tone is recognized. The language's tone system was given by John Goldsmith as an example of suprasegmental phenomena that go beyond the linear model of phonology laid out in *The Sound Pattern of English*. Igbo words may differ only in tone. An example is ákwá "cry", àkwà "bed", àkwá "egg", and ákwà "cloth". As
tone is not normally written, these all appear as (akwa) in print.

The language features vowel harmony with two sets of oral vowels distinguished by pharyngeal cavity size described in terms of retracted tongue root (RTR). These vowels also occupy different places in vowel space: [i ɪ e a u o ɔ] (the last commonly transcribed [ə], in keeping with neighboring languages). For simplicity, phonemic transcriptions typically choose only one of these parameters to be distinctive, either RTR as in the chart at right and Igbo orthography (that is, as /i ɻ e a u o ɔ/), or vowel space as in the alphabetic chart below (that is, as /i ɻ e a u o ɔ/). There are also nasal vowels.

Adjacent vowels usually undergo assimilation during speech. The sound of a preceding vowel, usually at the end of one word, merges in a rapid transition to the sound of the following vowel, particularly at the start of another word, giving the second vowel greater prominence in speech. Usually the first vowel (in the first word) is only slightly identifiable to listeners,
usually undergoing centralisation. /Kà ó mésyál/, for example, becomes /kòó mésyál/ "goodbye". An exception to this assimilation may be with words ending in /a/ such as /nà/ in /nà àlà /, "on the ground ", which could be completely assimilated leaving /n/ in rapid speech , as in "nàlà" or "n'èlà". In other dialects however , the instance of /a/ such as in "nà" in /ó nà èrí ńrí /, "he/she/it is eating", results in a long vowel, /ó nèèrí ńrí/.

Igbo does not have a contrast among voiced occlusives (between voiced stops and nasals): the one precedes oral vowels, and the other nasal vowels. Only a limited number of consonants occur before nasal vowels, including /f, z, s/.

In some dialects, such as Enu-Onitsha Igbo, the doubly articulated /g̃b/ and /k̃p/ are realized as a voiced/devoiced bilabial implosive. The approximant /r/ is realized as an alveolar tap [ɾ] between vowels as in árà. The Enu-Onitsha Igbo dialect is very much similar to Enuani spoken among the Igbo-Anioma people in Delta State.
To illustrate the effect of phonological analysis, the following inventory of a typical Central dialect is taken from Clark (1990). Nasality has been analyzed as a feature of consonants, rather than vowels, avoiding the problem of why so few consonants occur before nasal vowels; [CjV] has also been analyzed as /CʲV/.

Syllables are of the form (C)V (optional consonant, vowel) or N (a syllabic nasal). CV is the most common syllable type. Every syllable bears a tone. Consonant clusters do not occur. The semivowels /j/ and /w/ can occur between consonant and vowel in some syllables. The semi-vowel in /CjV/ is analyzed as an underlying vowel "i", so that -bịa is the phonemic form of bjá 'come'. On the other hand, "w" in /CwV/ is analyzed as an instance of labialization; so the phonemic form of the verb -gwá "tell" is /-gwá/.

**Writing system**

The Igbo people have long used Nsibidi ideograms, invented by the neighboring Ekoì people, for basic written communication. They have been used since at
least the 16th century, but died out publicly after they became popular amongst secret societies such as the Ekpe, who used them as a secret form of communication. Nsibidi, however, is not a full writing system, as it cannot transcribe the Igbo language specifically.

The wide variety of spoken dialects has made agreement on a standardize orthography of Igbo difficult. The current Ọ́nwụ́ (/oŋwu/) alphabet, a compromise between the older Lepsius alphabet and a newer alphabet advocated by the International Institute of African Languages and Cultures (IIALC), was agreed to in 1962. It is presented in the following table, with the International Phonetic Alphabet equivalents for the characters:

The graphemes 〈gb〉 and 〈kp〉 are described both as coarticulated /g̃b/ and /k̃p/ and as implosives, so both values are included in the table.

〈m〉 and 〈n〉 each represent two phonemes: a nasal consonant and a syllabic nasal.
Tones are sometimes indicated in writing, and sometimes not. When tone is indicated, low tones are shown with a grave accent over the vowel, for example ⟨a⟩ → ⟨à⟩, and high tones with an acute accent over the vowel, for example ⟨a⟩ → ⟨á⟩.

**Usage in the diaspora**

As a consequence of the Atlantic slave trade, the Igbo language was spread by enslaved Igbo people throughout slave colonies in the Americas. These colonies include the United States, Dominican Republic, Jamaica, Belize, Barbados, and the Bahamas. Examples can be found in Jamaican Patois: the pronoun /unu/, used for 'you (plural)', is taken from Igbo, *Red eboe* refers to a fair-skinned black person because of the reported account of a fair or yellowish skin tone among the Igbo. *Soso* meaning *only* comes from Igbo.

The word *Bim*, a name for Barbados, was commonly used by enslaved Barbadians (Bajans). This word is said to derive from the Igbo language, derived from *bi mu* (or
either bem, Ndi bem, Nwanyi ibem or Nwoke ibem) (English: My people), but it may have other origins

THE PROVERBS OF OMENUKO, THE FIRST IGBO LANGUAGE NOVEL

Did you know that our distinguished Professor Chinua Achebe was only 3 years old when the very first Igbo novel, Omenuko, was published in 1933? Did you know that Pita Nwana is the father of the Igbo novel?

Some of us who were privileged to have been forced, yes forced, to study Igbo in primary schools were even luckier to have been made to read Omenuko. If you read Omenuko, in its Igbo language original, as I did, you will smell, feel, see, with all your senses, the authenticity of not just the narrator’s style, but also the labyrinthine richness of the culture and traditions within which the story takes place.
Pita Nwana, the father of the Igbo language novel, tells a simple story of Omenuko, a young man who concludes his apprenticeship with his master, in the business of trading, and found himself upwardly mobile to great things. But, like the proverbial spirit that kills a man when his life is sweetest, the protagonist experiences an unexpected mishap that suddenly grounded his progress.

What he does next, to salvage his business, an abomination of unspeakable proportions, forms the material and tragedy that takes the reader and Omenuko through exile from his village, regeneration while in exile, soul searching, atonement, and eventual redemption. All through the story, the reader is taken through authentic, though fictionalized, snapshots of early missionary and court interactions in Igboland.

For us in the diaspora, this story of Omenuko’s exile, though exiled internally in Igboland, and his nostalgic yearning for a return to his village, strikes a resonant chord. But that’s a topic for another day.
You will find, in this book, evidence that the proverbs of Things Fall Apart and Arrow of God, both written decades later, are all in Omenuko. You will find that our own fathers and mothers who have applied proverbs in their stories, including John Munonye (The Only Son), Flora Nwapa (The Concubine), Cyprian Ekwensi, Tony Ubesie (Isi Akwu Dara N’Ala; Ukwa Ruo Oge Ya O Daa), and numerous others must have read Omenuko.

Let’s hear from Pita Nwana himself on these timeless proverbs:

1. Awo anaghi agba oso ehihie n’efu (a toad does not run in the afternoon without a reason).

2. Oji oso agbakwuru ogu amaghi na ogu bu onwu (one who runs to join a war does not realize that war is death).

3. Uka akpara akpa bu isi k’eji ekwe ya (further discussion of an issue already settled is done with the nodding of the head).
4. Egbe bere ugo bere, nke si ibe ya ebena nku kwaa ya (may both the eagle and the kite perch but if one does not want the other to perch, may his wings break).

5. Onye no n’ulo ya n’eche mmadu, ukwu anaghi eji ya (one who is in his house waiting for a visitor does not get tired or develop waist pain).

6. Onye nwe ozu n’ebu ya n’isi (the relative of the dead person is the person who carries the corpse at the head).

7. Onye a na agbara ama ya na anuri, onye eboro ohi okwere la (while you rejoice at the news from an informer remember that the accused has not admitted it).

8. Emee nwata ka emere ibe ya obi adi ya nma (treat a child as his peers were treated and he will be happy).

9. Kama m ga erijuo afo dachie uzo ka m buru onu (I will rather remain hungry than eat so much that I collapse on the roadside).
10. Nwata ruru ima akwa ma n’anu ara nne ya, gini ka anyi g’eme ya? (what should we do to a child old enough to tie loin clothes if he continues to suck on his mother’s bosoms?).

11. Oko kowa mmadu o gakwuru ibe ya, ma na oko kowa anu ohia o gaa n’akuku osisi (when a human itches, he goes to another human to scratch it, but when an animal itches, it goes to a tree).

You may have noticed that when these and other proverbs from Omenuko have found their ways into other books written in English about the Igbo culture, readers have invariably credited and praised the authors. But Omenuko does not have the same worldly acclaim and publicity as those other “Igbo” novels only because it is written in the Igbo language. Do you, an Igbo man and woman, not see something wrong here?

A white woman, Frances W. Pritchett, took the time to translate the book into English just four years ago. Do you see the irony here? Do you? Well, I don’t really
need an answer because, as Pita Nwana wrote in Omenuko, uka akpara akpa bu isi k’eji ekwe ya (further discussion on an issue already settled is done with the nodding of the head). While my preference is that you read the book in the Igbo language original, I am happy that there is an English version now.

To give you an idea of the problem of which I write, consider that Things Fall Apart has been translated into over fifty world languages and Omenuko just one or maybe two. How then can we write about our culture in Igbo language without limiting the readership? Must we all write about our culture in the English language?

There is a solution to this serious chasm between the readership of Igbo language novels (such as Omenuko and Ije Odumodu Jere) and those of books about the Igbos written in English (such as Things Fall Apart and The Only Son).

Can any person introduce a style of writing that will bring a lasting marriage between English and Igbo by
preserving these idioms and proverbs in novels and short stories, while still presenting the Igbo/African stories through the English language?