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ANTHROPOLOGY AND ETHNOGRAPHY

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By Chuka Odike

FEATURE
IMAGE

Titled elder Onyeso of Agukwu Nri with ọfọ, ọtọnsi ritual staff, and goat skin bag. Photographed by Northcote Thomas in 1911. MAA Cambridge.

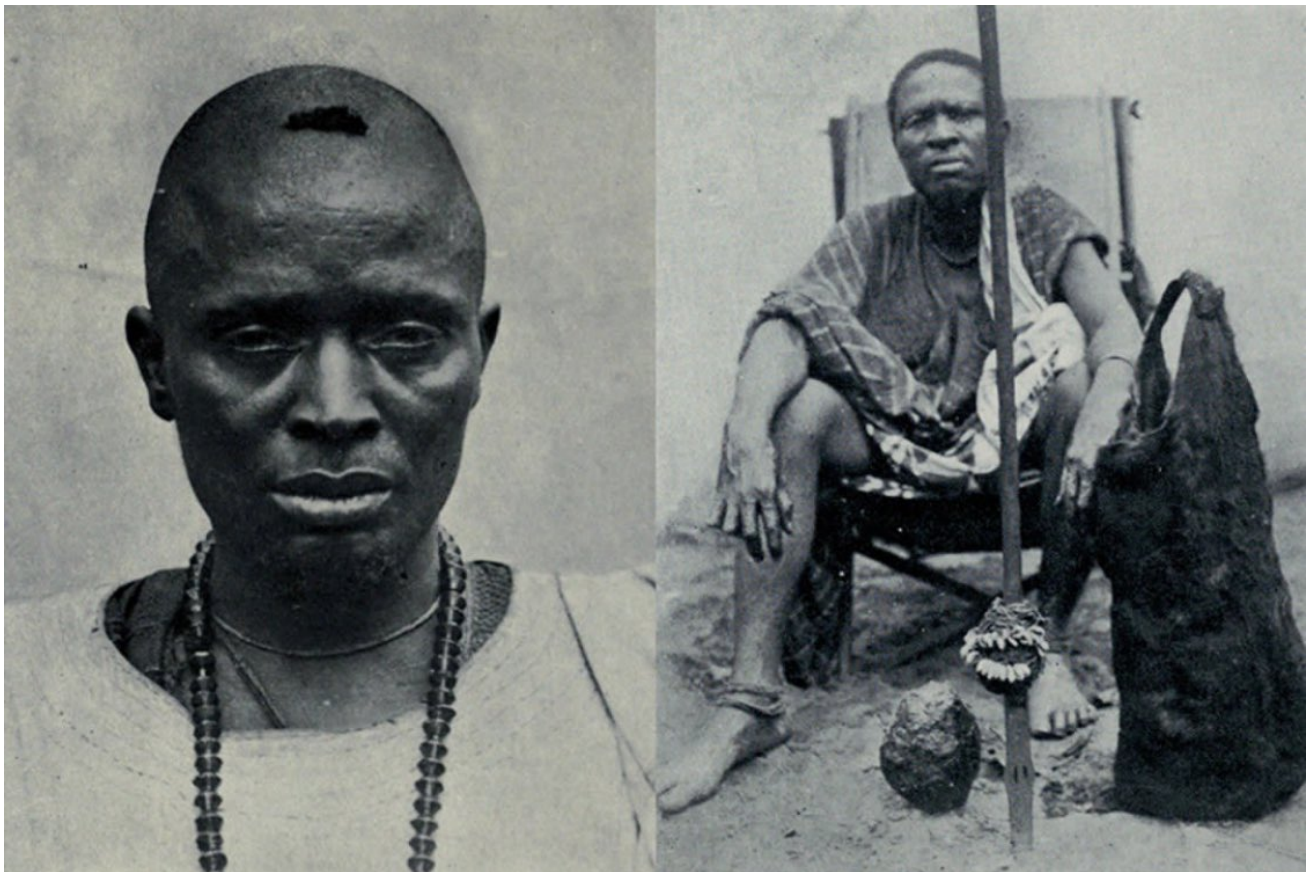
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The Titled Elder Onyeso and Igbo Cultural Heritage: A Glimpse into Early 20th Century Mgbakwu



In the early 1910s, renowned British anthropologist Northcote Thomas captured a photograph of a man from Mgbakwu and a titled elder named Onyeso in what is now Anambra State, Nigeria. This photograph offers valuable insight into the traditions, leadership, and attire of the Igbo people during the colonial era. The image also serves as a reminder of the deep-rooted cultural practices that shaped Igbo society, including the distinct attire worn by Igbo men and the prominent leadership structure within the community.

01

Traditional Igbo Attire: The Ótógbo Robe

One of the most striking aspects of the photograph is the attire worn by the man from Mgbakwu and the elder Onyeso. Both individuals are dressed in long, flowing robes known as ótógbo, a traditional garment that was commonly worn by Igbo men during the early 20th century. The ótógbo robe features wide, round necklines and open sides, providing comfort and ease of movement.

The robe is not only a functional garment but also a symbol of status and cultural pride. In Igbo society, men who held titles or occupied important roles within their communities often wore the ótógbo, making it a visual marker of respect and prestige. Interestingly, the term ótógbo is also used by neighboring ethnic groups, including the Idoma and Igala, highlighting the shared cultural influences in the region.



02

The Significance of Elder Onyeso

The titled elder Onyeso is an important figure in this photograph, and his possible connection to the Nri Kingdom adds an intriguing layer of historical significance. According to oral tradition and historical accounts, it is likely that Onyeso was the son of Eze Nri Enweleana, the revered monarch of the Nri Kingdom—one of the most important and influential states in pre-colonial Igbo society. The Nri Kingdom was known for its spiritual leadership, as the Nri ruler was considered the custodian of Igbo religious and cultural practices.

Onyeso's position within this lineage suggests that he played a key role in the leadership of the Nri people, further solidifying his status as an elder of great importance. It is also possible that Onyeso was the father of the current Eze Nri, Nri Enwelana, who carries the title of Eze Nri Onyeso today, continuing the legacy of this influential family. The photograph, therefore, not only captures a moment in time but also connects the viewer to a rich history of Igbo political and spiritual life.

03

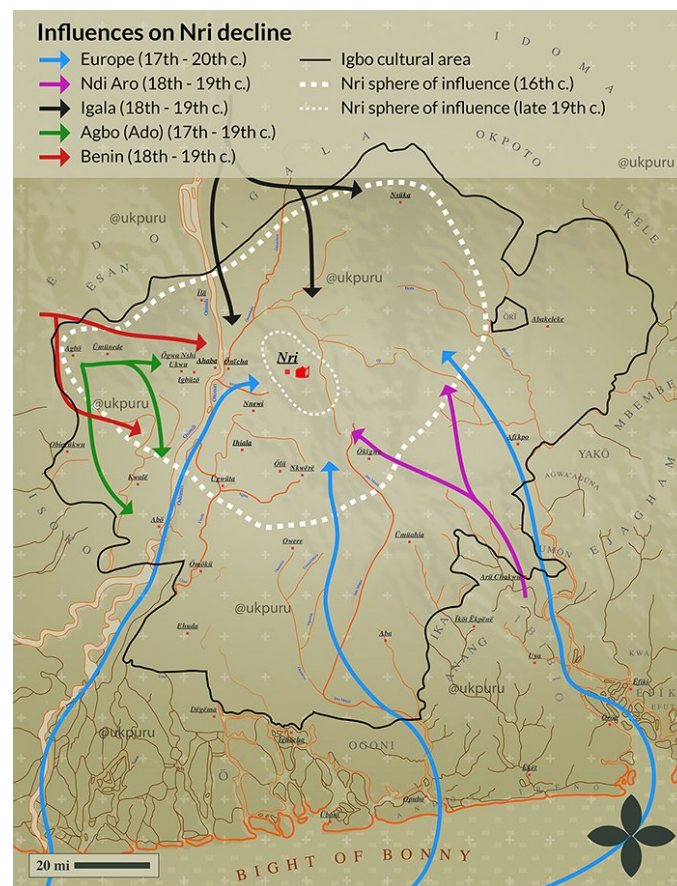
The Nri Kingdom and its Influence on Igbo Society

The Nri Kingdom, often considered the spiritual heart of the Igbo people, played a crucial role in shaping the cultural and religious practices of surrounding communities, including Mgbakwu. The Nri rulers, or Eze Nri, were not just political leaders but also spiritual figures who maintained a non-violent reign, emphasizing peace and the preservation of Igbo traditions. They were considered intermediaries between the people and the gods, and their authority



extended beyond their own territory.

The influence of the Nri Kingdom can be seen in the continuation of certain customs, including the wearing of specific regalia such as the *ótógbo*, and in the adherence to societal structures like the age-grade system, which is central to Igbo social organization. The photograph of Onyeso is a reminder of the enduring legacy of the Nri leadership and its impact on the cultural identity of the Igbo people.



In the face of militant cultures [like Benin, Igala, Abam, and the British] [...] [Nri influence] simply recoiled like a snail in its shell[.]” M. Angulu Onwuejeogwu (1972). “A Short History of the Odinani Museum”. *Odinani*. p. 50. Map after Onwuejeogwu (1979).



Colonial Context and Northcote Thomas's Documentation

Northcote Thomas was one of the key figures involved in documenting the cultures and practices of various Nigerian ethnic groups during the colonial period. His photographs and anthropological studies were part of a broader effort to catalog and classify African societies, often with a colonial perspective. While his work provides invaluable historical records, it is essential to approach his documentation with a critical eye, considering the colonial context in which it was produced.

Thomas's photographs, including the one featuring the man from Mgbakwu and elder Onyeso, serve as a rich visual record of Igbo life during the early 20th century. These images help preserve a snapshot of Igbo culture and leadership, even as colonialism sought to reshape traditional societies.

05

Conclusion: The Enduring Legacy of Igbo Leadership and Culture

The photograph of the man from Mgbakwu and elder Onyeso offers a fascinating look into the rich cultural and political traditions of the Igbo people in the early 20th century. Through their attire, position, and heritage, the individuals in the photograph embody the strength and continuity of Igbo society, even in the face of colonial pressures. The Nri Kingdom's enduring influence and the continued importance of leaders like Onyeso remind us of the resilience of Igbo cultural practices and the central role of leadership in maintaining societal cohesion.



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chuka Odiike

I'm a dedicated civil engineer with a passion for infrastructure development and community empowerment. With a strong background in engineering, my work focuses on creating sustainable solutions for urban and rural development projects. Outside of my professional career, I'm deeply interested in Igbo history and culture. I actively explores ways to impact society by using historical lessons to inspire and educate others about the rich cultural heritage of the Igbo people, aiming to bridge tradition and modern development.



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