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40,000 Years Ago in Igboland: *A Journey Through Ancient Igbo Origins*

By Idenze Ezeme

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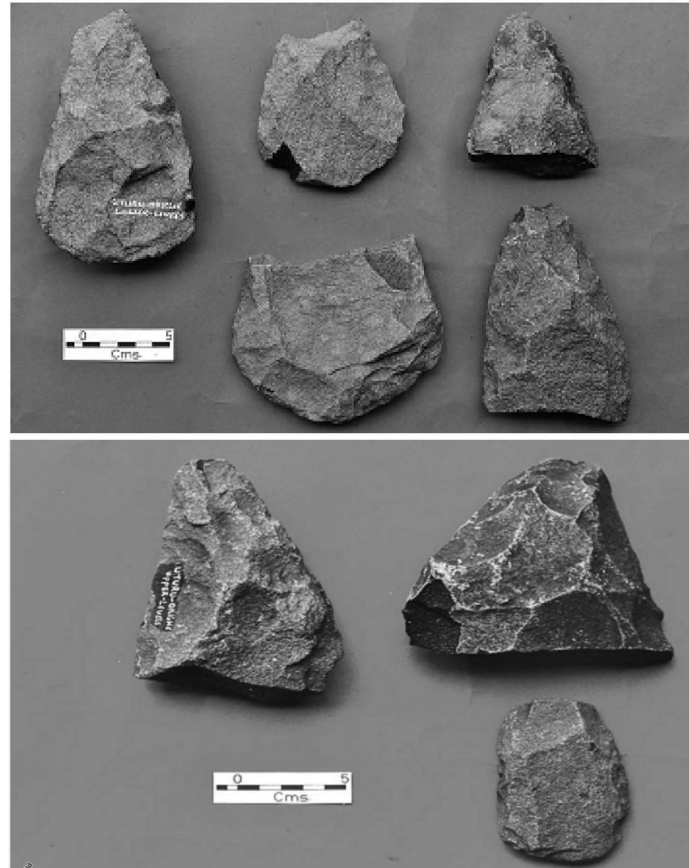
Long before Ancient and modern history recorded Africa's diverse cultures and empires, Igboland, in what is now southeastern Nigeria, was one of the birthplaces of early human development. Recent research from the African Genome Variation Project has revealed new information about the ancient origins of the Igbo people. This research shows that the Igbo have lived in the region for tens of thousands of years and were among the first human populations there.

Results from the AGVP show evidence of ancient hunter-gatherer ancestry among several African populations, including the Igbo. The study revealed evidence of Khoisan ancestry as far as 9,000 years ago. This genetic evidence indicates that the Igbo had been indigenous to their native homeland for at least a couple of thousand years. In another important genetic study, the Y chromosome haplogroup E-M2 date common among Igbo people was estimated to have diverged around approximately 39,300 years ago. The estimated dates for the ancestral record of the Igbo people were about 37,350 BC, way before the rise of most known civilizations.

Archaeological Discoveries in Igboland

All these genetic revelations are further validated by archaeological findings in Igboland. Other discoveries, like the Acheulian hand axes at Ugwuele Uturu and ancient pottery in places like Afigbo, show how deeply historical the Igbo people have been in this region. These relics have been dated several thousands of years and are material evidence of continuous human habitation, hence a suggestion of development and evolution independently by the Igbo over several millennia.

Besides that, some rare genetic markers found predominantly in the Igbo but not their neighbours suggest that they were the first settlers or lived alongside Pygmies, who are deemed some of the earliest settler inhabitants of the region.



Artefacts from Uturu (Ibadan 1978).

One of the major genetic markers characterizing Igbo ancestry is represented by the E-M2 haplogroup, its subclade E1b1a1a1f1a, otherwise called YCC E1b1a7. This genetic signature, marked by markers M191/P86, is extremely frequent in the entire nation of Nigeria, and also very high frequencies are found in Gabon, Cameroon, and Congo. This haplogroup has been detected in 54.3% of test subjects among the Igbo people. Indeed, almost equally high frequencies are also reported in other populations in Nigeria, the Annang, Ibibio, and Efik. Some estimates place the origin of these groups at ca. 39,300 years ago, while shared genetic ancestry coalescence happened around 15,700 years ago.

The Igbo Ukwu Culture and Early Igbo Life

The archaeological record presents a flourishing picture of the life of the Igbo people in ancient times. The stone-age implements of Ugwuele Uturu and other sites like Afigbo have been said to date back to about 3000 BC, a time when ancestors of Igbo people were already settled and doing fine on their territory, moulding a culture that would much later typify what has been described as the famous Igbo Ukwu culture in the 8th and 9th centuries AD. Moreover, the Igbo Ukwu culture developed well before those of Ife and Benin, further attesting to how advanced early Igbo civilization was. The only other known culture in West Africa said to predate Igbo Ukwu is that of the Nok.



Intricate bronze ceremonial pot, 9th century

Evidence from archaeological and linguistic sources shows that foragers inhabited Igboland as early as the Middle Stone Age-8000 BC-3000 BC. These early inhabitants probably migrated across the region, following well-trod elephant paths through the dense tropical rainforests. The first human habitation zones would have been

riverbanks, lakesides, and coastal areas, providing access to forest and aquatic resources. Oral traditions, such as the account by the Nri people of their mythological founder Eri descending from the sky, give small glimpses into this era, when the land was mostly unmanaged by human beings and plants like yams had not yet been domesticated.

Tools and Survival of Ancient Igbo Foragers

Early tools among the Igbo people are simple but highly effective. The Acheulian hand axes were used in hunting, working wood, and skinning animals. Sharpened sticks-what in Igbo they call “mbazi”-were used for digging out wild yams and cocoyams. Down at the rivers, fishing communities make full use of nets and bamboo rafts to subsist. Besides deep ecological knowledge, these tools have allowed the ancestors of the Igbo to succeed in their environments for thousands of years.



Samples of broken Hand axes were found at the Ugwuele Industrial Site on the 20th of May, 2014.

Genetic Insights and Ancient Hunter-Gatherer Admixture

The genetic findings presented above have been expanded to include evidence of complex and geographically widespread hunter-gatherer admixture within sub-Saharan Africa. About 9,000 years ago, there were genetic exchanges among ancient individuals in the Igbo who were more closely related genetically to present-day Khoe-San groups than to the rainforest hunter-gatherers. This is an important finding, given the scarcity of both archaeological and linguistic evidence for Khoe-San populations in West Africa. On the other hand, the ancient hunter-gatherer admixture present in the Igbo genome may reflect

some relicts of early Holocene populations, to which skeletal remains and rock art from the western Sahara provide supporting evidence.

Indeed, several admixture events were documented between hunter-gatherer populations and local communities in other regions of Africa, such as East and South Africa, as far back as 3,000 years. These dates also coincide with historical movements such as the Bantu expansion, which played a significant role in shaping the genetic landscape of sub-Saharan Africa. In East Africa, its genetic affinity to ancient peoples was closer to that of the Mbuti rainforest populations, while in the south, Khoe-San persons offered the main source for hunter-gatherer admixture in groups such as the Zulu and Sotho.



Prince Roland Napoleon Bonaparte (French Betty, fillette hotentotte (Hottentot girl), 9 ans. /Alamy

Collaboration in Genetic Research

The Igbo and other West African populations have contributed to the genetic samples used in these studies. The Igbo samples were provided by J. Oli of the University of Nigeria in Enugu. Besides them,

researchers from the University of Ghana and the University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, sampled the same samples among the Ga-Adangbe people of Ghana. Such collaborations within West Africa and with international institutions have provided truly priceless insights into the early genetic landscape of the Igbo and their neighbors, enabling a more holistic approach toward the understanding of ancient origins.

If the wealth of genetic, archaeological, and cultural evidence available was anything to go by, then surely the Igbo people migrating from Israel or any other land far removed from their own in Nigeria was no longer tenable. The Igbo are aboriginal to Africa, having evolved and thrived on their land for tens of thousands of years. Of course, there might be later migrations or marriages with other peoples, but those would constitute the penetration into a well-established and ancient group. Before delving into the Igbo people's indigeneity to support the debunking of such a theory that suggests their migration from Israel or other faraway lands, one must closely look at genetic, archaeological, and cultural evidence to support such fact.

Genetic Evidence: Genetic studies among West Africans, including the Igbo, have returned a legacy for their origins that is decidedly African and extends back many tens of thousands of years. Mitochondrial DNA, passed along through maternal lines, shows strong continuity within West Africa with no substantial markers for migration from areas such as the Middle East. Genetic analysis confirms that the Igbo are closer to other West African groups than to any population outside Africa, though superficial cultural and physical similarities may have set off various theories on migration.

Archaeological Evidence: Archaeological sites within Igboland support this claim of indigenous origins. For example, the Igbo-Ukwu site, which dates from the 9th century, shows evidence of a highly developed society with a complex use of bronze and copper and a trading network throughout the region. The absence of any indication of Middle Eastern origin can only be read from the archaeological

record of a self-sustaining civilization, with unique innovations rooted in African soil.

Cultural and Linguistic Evidence The Igbo belong to the Niger-Congo family of languages, one of hundreds of languages spoken throughout sub-Saharan Africa, and are deeply rooted on the continent. This fact is not explained by theories of Middle Eastern migration, which fail to provide reasons for the unique characteristics of the Igbo and similar languages. Besides, social structures, belief systems, and cultural practices among the Igbo resemble those among other West African groups rather than Middle Eastern customs.

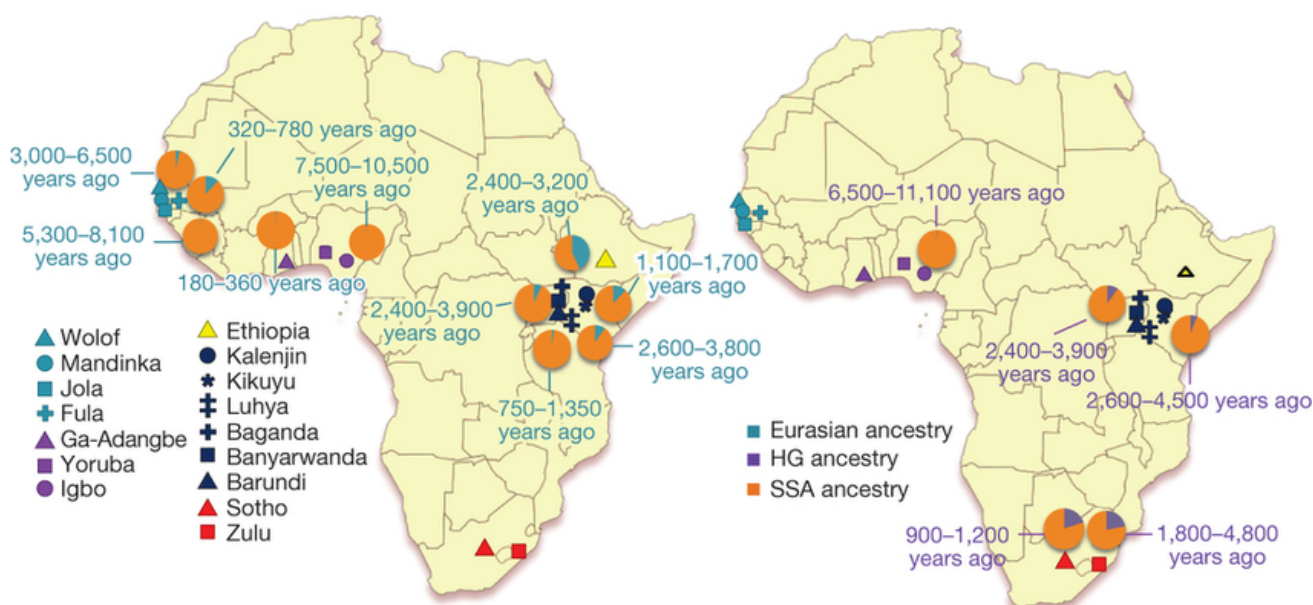
Influence of Colonial Narratives: The claim of Igbo migration from Israel became popular in colonial days, when missionaries and scholars, unschooled in African culture, tried to explain Igbo practices in terms of Judeo-Christian experience. Misunderstandings by Western scholars equated such traditional practices to those of Judaism or other Middle Eastern religions. African scholarship has demonstrated, however, that these commonalities are essentially accidental, and not indicative of a common ancestry or migration.

Distorted Theories from Other Sources: Other theories trace possible Igbo origins in ancient Egypt or Nubia; these, however, are based more on speculative interpretations than any credible research. In fact, fringe sources have attempted to link Igbo symbols with ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs, when the symbols actually emerged independently in their respective cultural contexts.

The claim of the Igbo people Hebrew ancestry is, therefore, suspect since it would relate the Igbo people to a progenitor whose existence was substantially more recent compared to that of Igbo settlements. Archaeological evidence demonstrates that the Igbos had already settled in the area that they occupied at the time of their discovery and had developed reasonably sophisticated practices such as ironworking many hundreds of years before either Eri or Gad could have been alive. For instance, the Lejja Iron Smelting Site is considered to be an ancient Igbo site that dates back some 2,000

years; archeological findings have shown that Igbo people have been living in this area for more than 6,000 years.

On the other hand, from a Jewish genealogical standpoint, Gad was born about 1564 BCE (10 Tishrei or 10 Marcheshvan, AM 2198), or about 3,000 years ago. So, if he had lived only 3,000 years ago, one wonders how his offspring could have founded the Igbo people, who had existed long before then. Furthermore, the correct pronunciation of Gad's son's name is "E-r-eye (Eri)," not "A-r-ii (Eri)," since even more discrepancies in their cultural and linguistic roots take place.



Dating and proportion of Eurasian and HG admixture among African populations. The proportion and distribution of Eurasian and HG admixture among different populations across Africa, with approximate dating of admixture using MALDER (code was provided by J. Pickrell)

The Igbo people have always made up the rich tapestry that has been Africa's history through the ages. Being one of the oldest known civilizations on the continent, Igbo can trace their lineage back to really obscure times. It is not a story of migration or recent arrival but rather one woven into the very fabric of the land they have called home since times unimaginable. The civilization indeed survived to leave an indelible legacy, standing to this day as one of the earliest civilizations in Africa-in fact, it was so strong in its ancient heritage backbone of resilience and adaptability and still is.

Distortions of Fulani and Ashanti Identity by Europeans

Some of these distortions are also found in other ethnicities like the Fulani and Ashanti. When the Europeans arrived in West Africa, they encountered an advanced civilization but refused to believe it could have been created by Africans. They thought that all African cultures they perceived as advanced were not African but rather lost tribes of Israel. They claimed that the Fulani and Ashanti people were too beautiful to be considered Negroes.

The Fulani: “False Negroes” and Theories of Asiatic Descent

The Fulani people, scattered throughout West and Central Africa, were often perceived by early European observers as somehow unlike other Africans. Their physical appearance—“straight-nosed, straight-haired, relatively thin-lipped, with copper or bronze complexions” (H.A.S. Johnston, *The Fulani Empire of Sokoto*, 1967)—convinced many that they were not “genuine” Africans but a superior stock. This was perpetuated through various theories of their origins by colonial officials and explorers, ranging from the Fulani being considered descendants of the Hyksos, an ancient nomadic people who ruled Egypt (*Journal of African History*, Vol. 9, 1968), to being a lost tribe of Israel (R. Smith, *Peoples and Cultures of West Africa*, 1971).

British journalists and socialist writers were fascinated by what they perceived as the Fulani’s unique racial characteristics and their knowledge of Hebrew legends (*The Times Literary Supplement*, 1933). This gave rise to the view that the Fulani were Asiatic, a people molded by both Egyptian and Israelite influences during the era of the Hyksos in the Nile Delta (*The Negro in the New World* by Sir Harry Johnston, 1910). They were portrayed as an elite with innate ruling qualities, suitable to be associated with the European colonial government. French and British colonial powers often used these racial theories to justify their policies, framing the Fulani as a “superior race” who could help administer the colonies (*Colonialism and Race in Africa* by Peter Duignan and L.H. Gann, 1975).

The Ashanti: A Legacy Linked to the Civilized Ethiopians and Phoenicians

The Ashanti, an Akan people largely located in what is now Ghana, also became the subject of racial theorisation. When the British traveler Thomas Edward Bowdich visited the Ashanti court at Kumasi in 1817 (Bowdich, 1819), he was struck by the complexity of their political and cultural life. Bowdich and others tried to place the Ashanti in a conceptual scheme by drawing analogies with ancient civilized peoples such as the Phoenicians, Egyptians, and Ethiopians rather than as an African civilization unto themselves.

Writing of Ashanti women, Bowdich made special note of their “Grecian features” and “brilliant eyes,” indicating a European connection. Other explorers and scholars, such as Friedrich Ratzel, described the Ashanti as a dominant race of conquerors, their culture and civilization highly developed and distinct from other Africans (Ratzel, 1897). Ratzel’s theory of *Lebensraum*—that superior cultures would naturally displace inferior ones—found reinforcement in his observations of Ashanti conquests on the West African coast (*The History of Mankind*, 1897). The Ashanti could not be truly African, but rather perhaps a lost tribe of Israel, because their accomplishments did not originate from them (Ratzel, 1897).

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Broader Colonial Narratives: The Denial of African Agency

French colonial officials extended this racial narrative into other West African contexts. They claimed that Ghana’s ruling dynasty had Jewish roots and that burial mounds in the Niger Delta were constructed by Jews. In 1939, a French official even suggested that a light-skinned ethnic group in the Niger Delta ruled over black populations with the aid of *You Houzou*, a supernatural being he interpreted as a Jewish symbol of power. Similar observations in Dahomey (now Benin) linked

certain rituals, such as circumcision and menstrual seclusion, to Jewish traditions, further fueling the idea of external origins for African cultural practices.

A Persistent Denial of African Civilization

These racial theories reflect a more general reluctance to acknowledge the autonomy and ingenuity of African civilizations. Europeans frequently dismissed African advancements as products of outside influence, often from Palestine or ancient Egypt. Anything that was considered sophisticated or refined in African culture was assumed to have its origin or influence from a non-African source. This pattern of thought reinforced colonial narratives justifying the subjugation of African societies, portraying them as incapable of achieving greatness without foreign guidance.

The Fulani and Ashanti were not alone in being subjected to such narratives, but their prominence within European discourse indicates the depth of these sets of misconceptions. Beyond distorting African history, such narratives cast up stereotypes that persisted well into the 20th century and influenced colonial policies, shaping global perceptions of African identity.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Nze is an Igbo history and culture enthusiast with an in-depth passion for exploring the rich cultural heritage, traditions, and historical narratives of the Igbo people. His works is mostly focused on pre-colonial Igbo societies, traditional belief systems, leadership systems, and the impact of European colonialism.



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