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A Glimpse into History: *The Story of a Child from Mgbakwu*

By Chuka Odike

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FEATURE
IMAGE

**A girl from Mgbakwu. Photo by
Northcote Thomas, 1910s.**

Article image · caption retained from the published Ozikoro article

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A GLIMPSE INTO HISTORY

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A photograph of a young girl from Mgbakwu, located in what is now Anambra State, was taken by British government anthropologist Northcote Thomas between 1910 and 1911. This image was part of colonial studies aimed at understanding African societies to facilitate indirect rule, a key strategy in British imperial governance. The photograph, originally black and white, was digitally colourized by Úkpúrú in 2018, added advanced filter by Ozi Ikoro 2024, and is preserved at the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (MAA), Cambridge.

This child, aged approximately 7 or 8, represents one of the earliest visual records of what would later be called “Nigerians.” At the time the photograph was taken, the community in Mgbakwu was grappling with the encroachment of British colonial forces, including the West African Frontier Force. Igbo settlements like Mgbakwu were actively resisting imperialism, and the world of this child—and their parents—was on the verge of profound transformation.

The term “Nigeria” might have been unfamiliar to this child and their family during this period, but it marked the beginning of a new national identity. Within just a few years, World War I would break out, and the amalgamation of Northern and Southern Protectorates into the Colony and Protectorate of Nigeria in 1914 would redefine their existence.

This child may have been among the first in their family to experience missionary influence, potentially receiving a European name or attending a mission school. They would have witnessed the rise of warrant chiefs and the imposition of new systems of “native

authority,” with titles like “His Royal Majesty” and “His Royal Highness” replacing traditional governance structures. By 1929, they might have heard of the Women’s War (Aba Women’s Riot) or seen firsthand the violence and systemic oppression of the colonial regime.

As time passed, they could have cast a vote for Nnamdi Azikiwe, a key figure in Nigeria’s independence movement and their generational peer. They might have traveled across the Niger or Benue Rivers, interacting with other ethnic groups who shared the imposed Nigerian identity. If they lived long enough, they would have witnessed Nigeria’s independence in 1960 and perhaps the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970), a conflict that deeply shaped the nation.

This photograph captures more than a moment; it encapsulates the life of a child standing at the threshold of dramatic historical, social, and cultural change.

Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (MAA). (n.d.). Photographs by Northcote Thomas. Cambridge: University of Cambridge.

Úkpúrú. (2018). Digitally colourized photographs of early Igbo.

Thomas, N. (1910–1911). Anthropological studies in Southern Nigeria. British Colonial Records.

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 explore 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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