



Ozi Ikòrò

AFRICAN HISTORY · CULTURE · INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE

CULTURAL HERITAGE

Aba: *The Commercial Heart of Igboland – A Journey Through History, Culture, and Resilience*

By Chukwunwike Ossai

Ozikoro.com · Cultural Heritage · 5 min read

FEATURE
IMAGE

NO FEATURED IMAGE IN THE RECORD

The article carries no featured image, so this panel is left as an honest empty space rather than filled with one.

Ozi Ikòrò
ABA

Aba: The Commercial Heart of Igboland - A Journey Through History, Culture, and Resilience

By Chukwunwike Ossai · Cultural Heritage · Ozikoro.com



Photo by OU travel & Tour

Aba, which is called the “Japan of Africa” because of its hustling spirit and the many things they have manufactured there, is a renowned city in Abia State, southern Nigeria. It is another centre of the Igbo people, where they run their businesses and show their culture. Aba has markets that are loaded, people who know how to create things, and stories that are deeply rooted in history. From Ariaria International Market to how they adapt and survive, Aba shows what made Igbo people stand strong.

Historical Foundations: From Pre-Colonial Roots to Colonial Transformation

As one renowned historian, Adiele Afigbo, said, Aba has existed since the Igbo people came from the Niger-Benue side over six thousand years ago. The place started as Ngwa Igbo villages like Umuokereke, Ehere, and Umuojima. They farm yams, cassava, and palm produce and sell them among themselves.

However, when the British people entered around the 1900s after they fought the Aro people, they now zoned Aba to the Southern Nigeria Protectorate. In 1915, the British made Aba one of the biggest stations because it is closer to the Opobo port. They built an army post and a native court. When they built the railway that linked Aba to Port Harcourt and Enugu in 1916, that was when business started to boom.

Aba showed her strength during the Aba Women's Riot of 1929, called Ogu Umunwanyi. It is the women from Aba and around, like Oloko, Ngwa, and Owerri, who got angry at taxing women and placing warrant chiefs. The women protested with songs, being naked, and protesting. The British killed over 50 women, but the protest led to the cancellation of some bad laws. The riot entered history books like Elizabeth Isichei's *A History of the Igbo People*.



Photo by OU travel & Tour

During the Biafra war (1967–1970), Aba was like the base of Biafra because of where it is located and how well they were making things. They used it for local weapons and supplies, but the war scattered many things. After the war, Aba picked up fast again because the Igbo people never gave up.

Markets like Ariaria International Market are not only for selling and buying; they're also a cultural centre. They sell everything from clothes, shoes, bags, electronics, and plenty of goods made in Aba. Ariaria is what people call Aba, "Japan of Africa." Other markets like Ekeoha, Cemetery, and Ngwa Road Market still shine.

For culture, Aba celebrates festivals like the New Yam Festival (Iri Ji) every August, with dance, masquerade and chop-chop. The Ekpe festival and wrestling (Mgba) are still very hot. The age-grade system is still among the Ngwa people, where people of the same age form groups to help each other and do work for the community. Afigbo said it in "Ropes of Sand."



Ekpe Festival Umuahia, Photo by Ou Travel and Tour.

Music in Aba booms very well. Highlife still reigns, and traditional music uses the Oja (flute), Igba (drum), and gong. Afrobeat has now joined Aba's nightlife. Aba still makes correct clothes like Isiagu and George wrappers, which people wear worldwide.

Economic Powerhouse: The Engine of Igboland

The Aba economy is a real gem in the southeast. Trade, manufacturing, and business are what make the place bubble.

Ariaria has more than 37,000 shops and over 50,000 traders. They make shoes, clothes, bags and many other things. The Igba Boi system remains strong—this is where boys go to learn to work under their bosses before they start up their own. Aba Fashion House, started in 2016, helped fashion grow, and Geometric Power Plant gave light to the industry.

Other markets sell electronics, food and other goods. Port Harcourt and the rail line help Aba trade reach Lagos, Kano and more.

Aba combines old Ngwa ways with city life. The population in 2006

was 534,265, including Igbo, other Nigerians and even foreigners.

Aba people who live abroad still support their homes with money and community projects. The Aba Women's Association in the UK also preserves culture, and the money they send helps the city. Aba influences politics in Abia State and the southeast, as they always voice their concerns to the federal government.

The spirit of resistance still exists—from the 1929 women's protests to the Biafra war, the Aba people have always stood. Markets are just like places where democracy happens, as traders normally talk and settle matters by themselves. But youth unemployment and crime still remain a problem. Programs like Aba Innovation Hub help youths start tech and better businesses.

Modern Aba: Balancing Tradition and Progress

Today, Aba still tries to blend culture with modern life. The place has turned into a Free Trade Zone and has the Aba Integrated Power Project to support industry. Governor Alex Otti, in 2023, said he would fix the roads and markets and bring Aba back to glory. Cultural events like the Aba Cultural Festival help to keep the Ngwa tradition alive.

Fashion and film are rising, too. Nollywood also uses Aba as its location, and designers show Made-in-Aba clothes at Lagos Fashion Week. The Abia State government supports the creative economy, so Aba has moved up.

Relations with Neighbours and Regional Context

Aba normally relates well to places like Ohafia, Umuahia, and Port Harcourt. Before, the Aro people used Aba to connect trade with the Ibibio and Ijaw. The railway helped link Enugu and Onicha. The Aro people also have masquerade traditions similar to those of Ohafia.

Aba is not just a city—it is the heartbeat of Igboland. From its Ngwa roots to the Women's War and Biafra War, Aba has shown strength.

The markets, festivals, and hustle spirit are a true example of the Igbo way—Nkeiruka—and better things are still coming. Even with problems like bad roads and floods, Aba still moves forward with the correct people and ideas. As the “Japan of Africa,” Aba creates a future that’s full of hope, culture and big dreams.

- Afigbo, A. E. (1981). *Ropes of Sand: Studies in Igbo History and Culture*. Ibadan: University Press.
- Isichei, Elizabeth. (1976). *A History of the Igbo People*. London: Macmillan.
- Vanguard News. (2023). *Ariaria Market Gets \$270 Million for Upgrade* – African Development Bank Report.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chukwunwike Ossai

An enthusiast in tech with deep passion for studying and showcasing the vibrant cultural heritage of southern Nigeria . Combining my skill with my obsession towards African history and traditions to create contributions that impacts the digital space.



Ozi Ikòrò

History worth reading.

African history · culture · indigenous knowledge
