



Ozi Ikòrò

AFRICAN HISTORY · CULTURE · INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE

ETHNOHISTORY

Abavo and Its Origins: *History, Migration, and Cultural Identity*

By Idenze Ezeme

Ozikoro.com · Ethnohistory · 4 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
ABAVO AND ITS ORIGINS

Abavo and Its Origins: History, Migration, and Cultural Identity

By Idenze Ezeme · Ethnohistory · Ozikoro.com

Situated within the Ika region west of the River Niger, Delta state, Abavo people whose history have long been shrouded in conflicting narratives and limited historical documentation. Many colonial reports and local oral traditions have offered contradictory claims for decades. Some claimed to come from the ancient Benin Kingdom, others tracing the lineage of Abavo to the heart of Igbo civilisation, particularly the kingdom of Nri in present-day Anambra State, Nigeria. These confusions started due to a lack of written records and proper oral documentation, or a disruption that might have occurred during the British colonisation.

Central Province.

279. The attitude of the natives has been friendly, with the exception of the unfortunate rising at Owa, in the Agbor District. The Owa people, a portion of the Ika people, who are again an offshoot of the Ibos, have always been famed for their lawlessness and truculent conduct, and have an intense dislike to any control or Government whatever shape it may take. The country was quieted by the end of August.

280. The Ishan country was visited by a patrol in June; and in September, on account of the defiant attitude of the people of Awgulu in the Oka District in seizing people and blocking trade roads, troops visited that district and Awgulu was occupied. A Native Court has since been established at this place.

Screenshot: Nigerian colonial government annual report or district report from the early 20th century

01

Lack of Historical Documentation and the Colonial Legacy

Abavo, like much of Ika, suffers from a critical absence of archaeological research and early written records from anthropologists and historians. Despite how rich their culture is, professional historians and anthropologists have largely ignored Abavo in favour of more centralised precolonial states. And this is why most of the existing historical narratives are derived mostly from colonial intelligence reports. The imperial agenda of the British administration often shapes these records. These reports frequently prioritised Benin-centric accounts to legitimise the colonial structure. They cast many decentralised Igbo communities like Abavo as satellite states of Benin or conquered groups, which they are not.

Avo and the Foundations of Abavo

diverse dialects being said to contain elements derived from the *Ijam* (to the south) and the *Igala* (*Idah*) to the north, a likely consequence of their position along the Niger and the history of earlier movements.

TABLE VII
(A) NORTHERN IKA

Name	Title (T) Sub-tribe (ST) Group (G) Village Group (VG)	Number of local communities where reported	Approximate number of active adult males (1935-40)	Political Division
1. Agbor	T	13	4,700	Agbor
2. Abavo	T	5	1,800	"
3. Owa	VG	1	2,200	"
4. Idumu Awa	VG	1	400	"
5. Ute Okpu	VG	—	1,100	"
6. Ute Ogbeji	VG	1	400	"

THE IBO-SPEAKING PEOPLES
Table VII—contd.

Name	Title (T) Sub-tribe (ST) Group (G) Village Group (VG)	Number of local communities where reported	Approximate number of active adult males (1935-40)	Political Division
7. Otokpu	T	1	300	Agbor
8. Akumazi	VG	4	1,400	"
9. Umuzede	VG	1	1,300	"
10. Igbo	VG	1	600	"
11. Mhiri	VG	1	400	"
12. Ezechima	T	8	4,000	Ogwashi Uku
13. Ogwashi Uku	T	18	2,300	"
14. Uburaku	T or VG	3	2,200	"
15. Okpanam	T	2	700	"
16. Ibusa	T	2	1,000	"
17. Akuku Atuma	G	2	700	"
18. Ilihi	T or VG	4	1,000	"
19. Odiani	T or VG	7	1,100	"
20. Idumuje	T or VG	2	900	"
21. Nsukwa	G	10	3,400	"

Approximate total active adult males 33,000

Notes

- Consists of Agbor with 10 outlying villages or settlements together with 2 independent villages of Ofiye and Emuhu. Founded by Chima who migrated from Benin to Onitsha and back to Owerri village of Agbor.
- Five villages. No tradition of Ibo origin. Founder Avo with Ibo title of Eze, who came from a place called Avo.
- Founder of Ogbeji (Owa) was Odugu son of Ije of Ute Okpu who himself came from Nkhi (Nri, Northern Ibo). The other villages are derived from Nkhi or other Agbor groups.
- From Ugboha in Ihan.
- Claims to be the 'mother village' of Ute Okpu and of various sections in Igbo, Otokpu and Onitsha Ugbo (Ezechima). Founder came from Benin; this group also claims to have come from the Ibo side of the Niger.
- 8, 10 and 11. Founders came from Benin.
- Claim a founder from Benin. Agbor claim them as an Agbor offshoot.
- Village groups of Onitsha Ugbo, Onitsha Ukwu, Onitsha Oluwa, Isiele Uku, Isiele Agala, Isiele Mapiima, Onior and Ezi also Oburaka in Orlani group. Founder Chima from Benin, who is also claimed as founder of Onitsha and Agbor.
- Founder Oda Igbe from Nkhi (Nri, Northern Ibo). A village group of 18 ogbe (i.e. villages or sections).
- Uburu Uke, Uburu Uno, Uburu Okiti; founded by two brothers, Obodo and Ezenmu, who migrated from Kwale District to Uburu Uno.
- From Uchi (Umuabara) in Abok district; Okpanam village group and Ugholu, Ibusa and Achalea villages.
- Founder Umejei of Ise (Southern Ibo) and 3 brothers from Nkhi (Nri, Northern Ibo).
- Akuku village group of 8 ogbe (sections), derived from 2 different Ibo ancestors. Atuma village from Isiele and others from Ibusa, Ute (Benin) and from Abok.

Credit: The Ibo and Ibibio-speaking People of South-Eastern Nigeria by Daryll Forde & G. I. Jones

In “The Ibo and Ibibio-speaking People of South-Eastern Nigeria by Daryll Forde & G. I. Jones,” it was recorded that the founder of Abavo was a figure named Avo, who bore the Igbo royal or priestly title Eze, which indicates an Igbo socio-political structure. Avo’s descendants, Udomi, Igbogili, and Azuowa, made up the main divisions of the clan. While some versions of this account attempt to link Avo to Benin, the use of Igbo titles and the Igbo governance system of the clan suggest an indigenous Igbo origin rather than an offshoot of Edo formation.

The same intelligence reports note that Osaigbobu, a later Obi of Abavo, was the father of Jegbefume in the hereditary ruling line. While some have interpreted “Obi” as an Edo borrowing, the title has no meaning in Edoid languages, but has meaning in Igbo languages. It is also widely used among Eastern and Western Igbo communities, particularly in Nri-influenced areas, predating widespread Benin imperial reach.



HRM, Obi Jegbefume I, ruled Abavo Kingdom from 1910-1953.

02

Linguistic and Cultural Evidence of Igbo Origin

A renowned anthropologist, Northcote Thomas, observed that Abavo retained “proto-Igbo archaic features in distinct nasalisation and incipient aspiration,” phonological traits that strongly indicate early Igbo linguistic roots (Thomas, as cited in Ogedengbe, 2004). These features are neither characteristic of Edoid languages nor reflective of Benin’s cultural influence. Such linguistic evidence adds weight to the assertion that Abavo is an indigenous Igbo community with only superficial Edo influences from centuries of interregional interaction.

Nri Influence and the Broader Igbo Migrations

A more robust historical framework emerges from the work of Prof. M.A. Onwuejeogwu, who documented the extensive spread of Nri lineages across Western Igboland between the 12th and 18th centuries CE. Onwuejeogwu (1981) affirms that Abavo was founded during movements from the core Nri settlements, including Ute-Okpu and Issele-Uku, into the Ika interior. He adds that such expansions occurred before the military rise of Benin, suggesting that Abavo's roots lie firmly in pre-Benin Igbo civilisation.

Many other scholars support this view, like Nwachukwu Ogedengbe in 2004, who cites Abavo, Ogwashi-Uku, Okpanam, Owa, and Ibusa as communities in the Ika and Aniocha areas with traditions of Nri origin. Historian Isichie, in 1976, also further hypothesised that Igbo-speaking groups originally inhabited the current Ika region. They only later encountered Benin elements through trade or military engagement.

While some colonial-era and postcolonial writers suggest that Benin soldiers founded or named Abavo and other Ika communities during their imperial expansion, this interpretation lacks substantial evidence from linguistics, culture, kingship and family system. T.E. Oseme argues that even if military conquest occurred, it did not erase the indigenous identity of the people, as they continued to speak their Igbo dialects and maintain customs consistent with their eastern kin. However, small Edo influence has been layered atop a much older Igbo sociocultural foundation.

With linguistic, cultural, and historical evidence, it is clear that Abavo's origins are purely Igbo. The claims of Edo origin are better understood as reflections of colonialism and the aftermath of the

Biafran War, not foundational truths. Abavo is a Western Igbo community rooted in ancient traditions that predate Benin's imperial influence by focusing on perspectives from oral traditions and scholarly work.

04

References:

- Isichie, E. (1976). A history of the Igbo people. London: Macmillan.
- Nigeria Intelligence Report on Abavo Clan. (n.d.). [Unpublished colonial intelligence record].
- Ogedengbe, N. (2004). Ika cultural history: The Igbo connection and the Benin factor. Ika Historical Society.
- Onwuejeogwu, M. A. (1981). An Igbo civilisation: Nri Kingdom and hegemony. London: Ethnographica.
- Thomas, N. W. (as cited in Ogedengbe, 2004). Colonial anthropological reports on the Ika and Anioma areas of Western Igboland.
- Forde, D., & Jones, G. I. (1950). The Ibo and Ibibio-speaking peoples of south-eastern Nigeria. International African Institute.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Idenze Ezeme

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.



Ozi Ikòrò

History worth reading.

African history · culture · indigenous knowledge
