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Colonial Anthropology and Igbo Society: *A Woman and Child from Agukwu Nri*

By Chuka Odike

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FEATURE
IMAGE

**A woman and child from Agukwu
Nri, photographed by Northcote
Thomas, 1910-11. Colorized Ukpuru
2018**

Article image · caption retained from the published Ozikoro article

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In the early 20th century, British anthropologist Northcote Thomas embarked on a series of anthropological surveys commissioned by the British colonial government. His work primarily focused on the cultures, languages, and social structures of various ethnic groups in Nigeria, including the Igbo people. Between 1910 and 1911, Thomas conducted extensive research in southeastern Nigeria, producing numerous volumes on the Igbo. Among the vast collection of his work are a number of unpublished photographs, including this image of a woman and child from Agukwu Nri, which provides a rare glimpse into the lives of Igbo women during that era



A woman and child from Agukwu Nri taken by Northcote Thomas in 1910-11.

This photograph, now part of the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (MAA) at Cambridge, captures not only the subjects' physical appearance but also offers insights into Igbo society, cultural practices, and colonial perspectives. The image, colorized by Ukpuru, serves as a significant historical artifact that bridges colonial anthropology and the cultural heritage of the Igbo people.

01

Northcote Thomas and the Anthropological Examination of Igbo Society

Northcote Thomas was the first government anthropologist appointed by the British colonial administration in Nigeria. His work aimed to

document the customs, governance structures, and languages of indigenous communities as part of the broader colonial enterprise. Thomas's studies in the Nri region, known as the heartland of Igbo civilization, provided foundational insights into the socio-political and spiritual systems of the Igbo people.

Agukwu Nri, where this photograph was taken, holds particular historical and cultural significance. Nri is regarded as the spiritual and cultural center of Igbo society, serving as the home of the Nri priest-king system, one of the oldest known forms of governance in West Africa. Thomas's research included detailed examinations of Nri's rituals, cosmology, and symbolic traditions.



Agukwu Nri, present-day Anambra State, c. 1911. Photographed by Northcote Thomas and assistants. MAA Cambridge.

The Significance of Women in Nri Society

The woman and child depicted in the photograph highlight the central role of women in Nri and broader Igbo culture. Igbo women have historically held positions of influence within their families and communities. They were key players in agriculture, trade, and cultural rituals, and they often participated in dual-sex political systems that balanced male and female authority.

The presence of the child in the photograph emphasizes the importance of lineage and family continuity in Igbo society. Children were regarded as blessings and future custodians of family and community heritage. The image also captures a moment of tenderness and familial connection, offering a counter-narrative to the often rigid and ethnocentric documentation of African societies by colonial anthropologists.



Woman and child of Agukwu Nri, photographed by the British colonial government anthropologist Northcote Thomas during his tour of the Awka area for an intelligence report on the Igbo people, c. 1910.

03

Colonial Documentation and Its Limitations

While Northcote Thomas's anthropological surveys are valuable for their detailed accounts of Igbo society, they must be critically examined within the context of colonialism. Thomas's work, like much colonial anthropology, was conducted through the lens of European superiority and often failed to fully appreciate the complexities of the societies it documented.

This photograph, for example, was considered "side material" and never made it into Thomas's published works. Such sidelining reflects the selective nature of colonial documentation, which prioritized

certain aspects of indigenous life—often those that served colonial interests—while neglecting others.

04

The Modern Relevance of Thomas's Work

In recent years, there has been renewed interest in Northcote Thomas's archives, particularly among Nigerian scholars and cultural preservationists. Institutions like the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in Cambridge have worked to digitize and share his collections, making them accessible to communities in Nigeria and beyond.

Colorized versions of Thomas's photographs, such as this image of the woman and child from Agukwu Nri, breathe new life into these historical artifacts, allowing contemporary audiences to engage with them in a more relatable and humanized way. They also serve as tools for reclaiming and reinterpreting the narratives of African societies that were often distorted or marginalized in colonial records.



This is a woman and child from Agukwu Nri taken in 1910-11 by the British colonial appointed anthropologist Northcote Thomas.

05

Conclusion

This photograph of a woman and child from Agukwu Nri, taken by Northcote Thomas in 1910-11, represents more than just a moment frozen in time. It is a testament to the resilience of Igbo culture, the evolving role of women, and the enduring legacy of Nri as a cultural and spiritual epicenter. While it reflects the limitations and biases of colonial anthropology, it also provides a valuable window into the richness of Igbo society, one that continues to inspire scholarly inquiry and cultural pride today.

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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 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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