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HISTORICAL STUDIES

Igbo, Benin, or Yoruba: *Which Ethnicity is the Oldest?*

By Idenze Ezeme

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FEATURE
IMAGE

**Map of Nigeria showing regions
mainly occupied by the Igbo, Benin,
and Yoruba tribes.**

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Map of Nigeria showing regions mainly occupied by the Igbo, Benin, and Yoruba tribes. Photo: Researchgate

The question of which ethnicity is the oldest among the Igbo, Benin, and Yoruba has long been debated by historians, anthropologists, and lovers of African history. These three groups possess rich cultural traditions and ancient stories of origin supported by archaeology. Each has evidence showing its deep historical roots. In this article, we explore their origins, histories, and contributions to determine which civilisation may indeed be the oldest.

The Igbo people mainly occupy southeastern Nigeria and are known

for their entrepreneurial spirit, republican governance, and rich cultural heritage. The Igbo language belongs to the Niger-Congo family and represents one of Africa's largest linguistic groups, numbering about 40 million people. The Igbo also inhabit Delta State (especially Anioma), parts of Rivers, Benue, and Kogi States, and areas in Cross River and Akwa Ibom.



Igbo-Ukwu bronze artifacts, showcasing the advanced craftsmanship of the ancient Igbo civilization. Photo: Thingsnigeria

The Benin people are associated with the Edo ethnic group in present-day Edo State, southern Nigeria. They are renowned for the ancient Benin Kingdom, which flourished for centuries with a highly developed political system, artistry, and extensive trade networks. Its influence extended far beyond modern Nigeria, establishing it as one of West Africa's most notable civilisations.



This brass plaque shows the Oba, or King, of Benin and his attendants. Photo: BBC – Enhanced by Ozikoro

The Yoruba occupy southwestern Nigeria, with populations in Benin and Togo. They are famous for their elaborate political organisation and ancient cities such as Ife and Oyo. Yoruba religion, art, and mythology—especially the worship of Orìṣà, have influenced African spirituality globally.



600 Year Old Ife Terracotta. Photo: MuseumNG

Historical Background and Origin

Archaeological and genetic studies show that Igboland is one of the earliest regions of human habitation in West Africa. Findings from Ugwuele, Nsukka, and Afikpo reveal human occupation dating back as far as 300,000 BC, with stone tools belonging to the Acheulean tradition. These are the oldest known human settlements in Nigeria and among the oldest in sub-Saharan Africa.

Genetic evidence from the African Genome Variation Project supports this, showing that the Igbo people have deep ancestral continuity in southeastern Nigeria going back tens of thousands of years. The presence of Y-chromosome haplogroup E-M2, dating to about 39,300 years ago, links them to ancient West African hunter-gatherer populations and possibly earlier Khoisan-related groups.

01

Ugwuele, Nsukka, and Igbo Ukwu Civilisations

At Ugwuele (in Uturu, Abia State), archaeologists uncovered extensive Stone Age tools, including hand axes, cleavers, and picks—evidence of organised human habitation long before 8000 BC. Later Igbo sites like Nsukka and Afikpo also yielded Neolithic artefacts that show continuous settlement through to the Iron Age.

The Igbo-Ukwu civilisation (8th–9th centuries AD) later marked a peak of metallurgical and artistic advancement, predating the Ife and Benin civilisations. Its bronze and copper works are among the earliest and most sophisticated in sub-Saharan Africa.

02

Connections to Other African Groups

Genetic studies indicate that early Igbo populations interacted with other African groups such as the Bantu and Nilotic peoples over millennia. Their ancient genetic structure, dating back to the early Holocene, confirms Igboland as a cradle of continuous human presence and cultural evolution in West Africa.

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

The Benin Kingdom, also called the Edo Kingdom, was established around 1180 AD. Traditionally, the kingdom is said to have been ruled first by the Ogisos—"Kings of the Sky"—before the arrival of Oranmiyan, a prince from the Yoruba city of Ife. The influence of

Oranmiyan initiated the rule of the Oba dynasty, which still exists today.

The Benin people have a solid history in the arts, particularly bronze-making. The famous Benin Bronzes, which date back to at least the 13th century, are proof of a sophisticated and highly organized society.

The Yoruba people believe their origin is in Ile-Ife, which they consider the cradle of Yoruba civilization. According to Yoruba legends, Ile-Ife was founded by Oduduwa, a popular ancestral figure said to have descended from heaven. Historically, Ile-Ife has been in existence since about 500 AD and is thus one of the oldest cities in West Africa.

Archaeological evidence shows that Yoruba civilization is very old. For example, the Ife terracottas are from the 12th century and show how good the Yoruba were in arts and culture. Another major Yoruba state was the Oyo Empire, which came later and was important in politics and trade in West Africa.

Comparing Ancient Times: Archaeological and Historical Evidence

Findings at Ugwuele, Nsukka, and Afikpo date to the Early Stone Age—far earlier than Yoruba or Benin sites. The Igbo-Ukwu discoveries further demonstrate that the Igbo had developed intricate bronze casting and long-distance trade systems by the 9th century AD. These provide some of the earliest proofs of advanced metalworking in sub-Saharan Africa.

The Benin Kingdom's history is obtained from oral tradition, written accounts, and findings of excavations. The 13th-century Benin Bronzes give us insight into how advanced the state was in art and science. The earlier period of the Benin Kingdom under the Ogisos is less well-known due to limited archaeological data.

Stories told and finds from archaeology, particularly at Ile-Ife, sustain the civilization of the Yoruba. The Ife terracottas and other finds

indicate that Ile-Ife was a thriving city as early as the 6th century AD. This puts Yoruba culture as one of the oldest in the region with a long tradition of urban civilization and great art.

Cultural Contributions and Influence

The Igbo's acephalous (non-centralised) system of governance emphasised equality, consensus, and moral law. Their artistic achievements, particularly in bronze casting (Igbo-Ukwu) and masking traditions (Mmanwu), are vital to African heritage. The Igbo were also early traders connecting the hinterlands with coastal regions long before colonial times.



Igbo Mmanwu masquerade during the annual new yam festival, Akokwa, central Igboland. Photo: Eli Bentor, 2009.

The influence of the Benin Kingdom was far ahead of its territorial boundaries. The Benin Bronzes are some of the most prized artworks in African history. Their designs are very complex and of high historical significance.



Edo Kingdom of Benin. Late King Akenzua II in coral regalia during palace ceremony. 1964. Photo: Monika Ettlin

The systems of governance, trade relationships, and even military strategy were well developed, hence making the state a powerful force that dominated the neighboring areas for a long period.

The Yoruba people have contributed a lot to the religion, art, and literature of Africa. Many Orìṣàs are present in Yoruba myths, which have influenced African spirituality all over the continent and the world. Yoruba's artwork is well known across the globe, such as the Ife terracottas and bronze works. In addition, the Yoruba language and culture have expanded to many places, mainly through their people who are abroad.

Determining the oldest civilisation requires weighing archaeological, linguistic, and genetic evidence rather than oral myths alone.

- Ugwuele and Nsukka sites (Igbo): human occupation dating back to 300,000 BC, the oldest in Nigeria.
- Igbo-Ukwu (Igbo): advanced metal culture from the 9th century AD,

predating Ife and Benin.

- Ile-Ife (Yoruba): urban civilisation dating from around 500–600 AD.
- Benin Kingdom (Edo): emerged around 1180 AD, after Yoruba and Igbo civilisations.
- Igbo oral traditions link to ancient Nri culture (c. 900 AD) and even earlier Stone Age ancestry.
- Yoruba traditions trace to Ile-Ife (c. 5th–6th century AD).
- Benin traditions begin with the Ogiso dynasty and later the Obas (post-12th century AD).

While Yoruba and Benin histories are well documented in the medieval and early modern eras, archaeological evidence clearly shows that the Igbo are the oldest continuous inhabitants of what is now Nigeria, with Ugwuele and Nsukka establishing them as one of the world's oldest surviving ethnic groups.

Rather than ranking these groups competitively, it is more meaningful to appreciate how Igbo antiquity, Yoruba urbanism, and Benin statecraft collectively shaped West African civilisation.

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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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