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ETHNOHISTORY

## Labour, Exploitation, and Resistance: *The Legacy of the Ekulu Coal Mine and the Iva Valley Massacre in Colonial Nigeria*

By Chuka Odike

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FEATURE  
IMAGE

**Workers at Ekulu coal mine in 1959,  
near Enugu, Nigeria.**

Article image · caption retained from the published Ozikoro article

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**LABOUR, EXPLOITATION, AND RESISTANCE**

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"The Ekulu coal mine is one of five currently being operated by the statutory Nigerian Coal Corporation. Nigeria is the only country in Equatorial West Africa at present producing coal." Eliot Elisofon, 1959. Smithsonian Institute.

The Ekulu coal mine, one of five coal mines operated by the Nigerian Coal Corporation (NCC), played a pivotal role in Nigeria's economy and colonial history. Situated near Enugu, a region often called the "coal city," this mine was part of a broader mining industry that, by the 1940s, positioned Nigeria as the only producer of coal in Equatorial West Africa. Coal from the Enugu mines fueled energy needs across West Africa, driving economic growth in rail transportation, industrial power, and home heating. The discovery of coal in Enugu in 1909 by British geologist Albert Kitson led to rapid expansion, particularly during World War II, when demand for coal soared.



"Iva Mine, Ekulu, Enugu."

By 1959, conditions at Ekulu and other mines involved grueling labor, with workers known as "general surface labour" often tasked with physically demanding jobs, like pushing heavy coal tubs to terminals for transportation. These conditions were indicative of a broader trend of exploitative colonial labour practices, with Nigerian workers often

subjected to low wages, inadequate safety standards, and little recourse to address grievances. To keep control over labour unrest, British authorities had banned strikes in 1941 and had established trade unions as a way to agitate rising dissatisfaction. However, rather than quieting opinions, the unions became focal points for labour and anti-colonial activism.

The Iva Valley Massacre of November 18, 1949, marked a significant turning point in the struggle for workers' rights in colonial Nigeria. The massacre was the culmination of mounting tensions as workers protested poor working conditions, low wages, and a lack of job security. Okwudili Isaiah Ojiyi, the General Secretary of the Colliery Workers Union (CWU) in 1944, became a central figure in advocating for the miners rights. His activism was particularly notable given that he was an outsider, not from the local Agbaja (Udi/Ezeagu) or Nkanu communities, a fact that highlighted his commitment to the cause and won him respect among the miners.

Throughout 1949, the miners ramped up their resistance with “go slow” tactics that slowed coal production, frustrating the British managers mine's. This protest reached a boiling point on November 14, when the colliery hewers staged a sit-in, fearing that they were being replaced by less-skilled workers. On November 18, British authorities responded with a heavy hand. Assistant Police Superintendent F. S. Philips, stationed at the mines, ordered police to open fire on the striking miners, resulting in the death of 21 workers and wounding 51 others. Reports from the incident remain incomplete, with the UK Colonial Office withholding many details from publication.



A mould artifact in Enugu in reference to the Ekulu coal mine massacre.

The massacre sent shockwaves across Nigeria and became a flashpoint for anti-colonial activism. In response to public outrage, the colonial government was pressured into establishing commissions to investigate labour practices and address grievances. The massacre also fueled nationalist sentiment, serving as a catalyst for Nigerian independence, which was achieved just over a decade later, in 1960. The Iva Valley Massacre is still remembered as a symbol of the struggle against exploitation and the fight for workers rights in Nigeria.

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

### Chuka Odi

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 explores 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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