



Ozi Ikòrò

AFRICAN HISTORY · CULTURE · INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE

ETHNOHISTORY

Nsukka:

The Brain Capital and Cultural Beacon of the Igbo People

By Chukwunwike Ossai

Ozikoro.com · Ethnohistory · 6 min read

FEATURE
IMAGE

**Artist Chinyere Odinukwe
introducing her work to HRM Obi
Martha Dunkwu and other guests at
the exhibition opening in Nsukka.**

Article image · caption retained from the published Ozikoro article

Ozi Ikòrò
NSUKKA

Nsukka: The Brain Capital and Cultural Beacon of the Igbo People

By Chukwunwike Ossai · Ethnohistory · Ozikoro.com

Nsukka is a notable town in Enugu State, Nigeria. It has become one of the biggest centers for culture, books, and history in Igbo land. The town houses the University of Nigeria, and the place has become a hub for intellectual work, art, and tradition. From what people say, colonial records, old stories, and what archaeologists have discovered. This article discusses Nsukka's background, its politics, economy, culture, and what the place still means in today's Nigeria.



Odo Nwagbogho, the only female Odo in Aku, Nsukka.

Historical Origins of Nsukka Nsukka's history stems from how the Igbo people settled in different places in southern Nigeria. Many Igbo clans, such as Eha, Opi, and Obukpa, were among the first people to settle there because the land is fertile and closer to the trading road that connects Igbo land to the Benue side and Northern Nigeria.

They found old items, such as pots and iron tools, in the area, which shows that people have lived there for over a thousand years. By the 10th century, Nsukka had become a group of villages ruled by elders and priests, and the people had a strong belief that the land held spiritual powers. Although they are close to the Nir kingdom that influences their religion and culture, Nsukka still rules itself.

Because they are close to other tribes like the Igala, Idoma, and Tiv, they trade with each other very well, exchanging items such as food, iron tools, and clothes. Even in ancient times, cowries and beads show that they were traded to such an extent that they reached the Sahara Desert.

When the colonial masters arrived in the late 1800s, the British set up an office in Nsukka because they knew the place had power. In the early 1900s, they turned Nsukka into headquarters. Missionaries came in, especially the CMS, bringing the Book and the Church. When the University of Nigeria was built in 1960, it boosted Nsukka's reputation as a brain town both in Nigeria and worldwide.

Socio-political organisation Nsukka politics follows the Igbo people's way. They don't have a single king who controls everyone, but each community has its ruler. Nsukka town is home to various communities, including Nsukka, Eha, Alumona, Obukpa, and Ihe Owerre, each with its own traditional leader, known as an Igwe or Eze. The Igwe of Nsukka presently is HRH Igwe George Asadu. He has brought everyone together under one culture. Nsukka is also a local government area (LGA) under Enugu State.

During colonial times, the British brought warrant chiefs, and this one destroyed Nsukka's traditional rule. Women got angry in 1929 during

the Aba Women's Riot. Women in Nsukka joined protests against the tax. After independence, traditional rulers blend with modern governments and continue to protect their culture.



HRH IGWE ASADU

Economic Foundations Nsukka's economy is strong, driven by agriculture, trade, publishing, and modern businesses. The land is good for farming. They plant yams, cassava, corn, and palm trees. Yam is a big deal in Nsukka. Every year, they celebrate Yam Festival (Onwa Asaa), in which they praise Ifejioku, the yam god.

Markets are very important, like Ogige Market, one of the biggest in Enugu State. In colonial times, the palm oil trade helped the town grow. Today, Ogige still sells a wide range of items: food, clothes, and electronics.

The University of Nigeria in Nsukka helped the economy. Students, teachers, and workers bring businesses, hotels, restaurants, shops, and services that flourish. Other schools like the Federal College of

Education in Eha-Amufu also helped the economy grow.

Long ago, people did handwork such as pottery making, weaving, and blacksmithing. Places like Eha-Alumona were popular for pot making. Despite technology having taken over many of these tasks, some people still do them for cultural and small businesses.

They still face issues like bad roads, no electricity, and unemployment. Young people leave for big cities like Enugu and Lagos. Governments are still trying to fix roads and create business zones to help matters.

Cultural Contributions Nsukka mixes cultural traditions, colonial, and modern life. From festivals to arts, music, books, and stories, the place has a strong cultural voice in Igbo and Nigeria.

Festivals and Rituals Onwa Asa is the biggest festival. They use this to thank God for their abundance in farming and honor their ancestors. The Omabe Festival is another one that features a masquerade. They believe that these spirits who wear marks represent ancestors. Music and dance are all over the place, like Igba (drum music), Ogene (gong music), and Odomala (ceremonial dance). They are played at festivals, burials, celebrations, and masquerades, such as Omabe and Ijele. It's a big spiritual and social display.

Artistic and Literary Legacy Nsukka is the home of African art movements. "Nsukka School" where Uche Okeke, Chike Aniakor,, and Obiora Udechukwu started. They used Uli arts, (Igbo traditional line arts) mixed it with the modern art style. The art has gone worldwide and is well-respected everywhere.

Writers who passed through the University of Nigeria are numerous. Chinua Achebe, Christopher Okigbo, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Okigbo's poetry has a strong Igbo root; Chimamanda's book, "Like Half of a Yellow Sun," talks about Nsukka and the civil war experience.

Historical Significance During the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970),

Nsukka suffered as a Biafran stronghold. The war brought fight, hunger, and pain. The University of Nigeria became the center for Biafra scholars. Stories from that time are still found in war books and the community.

Nsukka in the colonial and post-colonial Eras. Colonial times changed Nsukka's economy and life. The British built a court, schools, and a market. CMS missionary brought about the book and the church. It is from here that many future Nigerian leaders started acquiring knowledge.

When the University of Nigeria started in 1960, they built like an American school to help Nigeria produce its scholars. The arts and literature department changed how people see African culture.

The civil war affected Nsukka badly. The federal army took over the university and vandalised a lot of things, including the library. After the war, people came together, rebuilt, and the university bounced back as the Brain town.

After Nigeria divided Enugu State in 1991, Nsukka became one of the larger Local Government Areas, and development increased from that time. Today, Nsukka has a balance of tradition and modern city life.

The culture remains strong, but churches and foreign things are affecting the old ways. Festivals like Onwa Asaa and university art departments are still in operation, but they need more support to protect the tradition. Pottery and weaving are almost extinct. They need help to bring them back.

Nsukka is an example of how Igbo people value education, have a strong culture, and a never-give-up attitude. From an old trading town to a war ground, and now Nigeria's brain center, Nsukka has proven its importance. Their festival, arts, writing, and school showcase how traditional and modern life can coexist.

As Nsukka is facing new issues, the town still has the power to shine.

If they hold onto their culture, fix their roads, and use their brain power well, Nsukka would still lead. As an Igbo proverb says, “Knowledge is the root of wisdom.” Nsukka, with its rich culture and books, can gain a wealth of wisdom for the future.

- University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN) – Official university history and development records: <https://www.unn.edu.ng/history>
- Achebe, Chinua. *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra*. Penguin Press, 2012.
- Isichei, Elizabeth. *A History of the Igbo People*. Palgrave Macmillan, 1976.
- Okeke, Uche. “Art in Development: A Nigerian Perspective” in *Nsukka Artists and Nigerian Contemporary Art*. National Gallery of Art, Lagos.
- Nzewi, Ugochukwu-Smooth C. *The Nsukka Group and the Politics of Postcolonial Modernism*. *African Arts*, Vol. 45, No. 2, 2012.
- National Commission for Museums and Monuments (Nigeria) – Archaeological findings and cultural preservation reports.

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
