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Orlu: *The Commercial and Cultural Powerhouse of Imo State*

By Chukwunwike Ossai

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ORLU

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View of Orlu. Photo from Eboh Media YouTube

Orlu is a large city in Imo State, Nigeria. It has become one of the largest towns in Igbo land, known for its role in business and culture, and for having survived the test of time. The city is located in the centre of southeastern Nigeria and has grown from a small Igbo village to become a significant hub for trade, education, and tradition.

Historical Origins of Orlu In the 1500s, Orlu consisted of several villages that did their own things but still cooperated. Because it is closer to a trade road that connects Igbo land with the Niger Delta and Cross River area, the city began to mix with people from other groups, such as the Aro people from Arochukwu and others around

them, which helped shape the development of Orlu.

When the British came to colonise Nigeria, they noticed Orlu's potential. In the late 1800s, they set up an office there. In the early 1900s, Orlu became a divisional headquarters for missionaries and traders.

During the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970), Orlu was a key location in the Biafran conflict. They suffered a lot during the war, but after the war, Orlu returned strong and became a serious business and cultured area again. Today, Orlu is competing with Owerri, one of the biggest and most important cities in Imo State.

Socio-Political Organization How the Orlu people normally run their community is still based on Igbo tradition — everybody has a voice, but the elders and chiefs do guide. The city has various communities, including Orlu, Umuna, Amaifeke, and Ihioma. Each of them has its traditional ruler whom they call Eze. The Eze has a council of elders, known as Ndichie, that helps settle matters and protect the culture. Eze Orlu is the main leader who represents the whole Orlu area.

The leadership side of government is handled by Orlu Local Government Area (LGA), which is run by the chair, who the people elect. The LGA is responsible for roads, water, and schools and works with traditional rulers to ensure the community is well cared for. Orlu's voice is very strong in Imo State politics, and they have produced many big people in the government.

When the British arrived, they introduced the warrant chief system, which disrupted the traditional Igbo way. This caused problems, and Orlu women became angry, joining the Aba Women's Riot in 1929 to protest against taxes and poor treatment. Today, traditional rulers have balanced with the modern way of government to help develop and protect culture.

The Orlu economy was driven by farming, trading, and business. The land has good soil that grows cassava, maize, and palm oil well. Yam is

a big deal in Orlu—they even have a festival (Iwa Ji) where they celebrate yam and thank Ifejioku, the yam god.

Trade is another big business in Orlu. For a long time, markets like Eke Ututu and Orlu International Market have started moving. During colonial times, Orlu sold a lot of palm oil through the Njaba River. Today, the Orlu market is one of the largest in Imo State. They sell various items, including food, clothing, electronics, and more.

Schools like Imo State University Teaching Hospital were attracting students and workers, which helped grow the service sector. As traders sold to other towns, transport and retail businesses were also active. Handwork like pottery, blacksmithing, and weaving still existed, even if they were no longer as popular. Some people still made cultural things for home use. People traveling abroad or to big cities send money back home to build schools, hospitals, and support the community.

Festivals and Rituals Iwa Ji (the new yam festival) is the biggest festival in Orlu. People use it to thank the gods and their ancestors and enjoy dance, food, and celebration. Another one is the Okorosha masquerade festival, which combines spirituality and entertainment.

Orlu's music and dance culture are strong. They have Igba (drum music), Ogene (gong), and Atilogwu (acrobat dance). Masquerade performances like Mmanwu and Ijele are still important and carry a spiritual and social message.



Imo State University Teaching Hospital, Orlu. Photo from Hope Uzordinma's Facebook page

Oral Traditions and Historical Narratives People in Orlu know how to tell a story. Elders use stories, proverbs, and songs to explain how things began. They tell how people settled, trade started, and how they survived the war. Books and scholars like A.E. Afigbo have helped document these stories. Orlu has produced many intelligent people and leaders. Its schools and colleges have trained people who contribute to Nigeria today. The teaching hospital at Imo State University also helped train doctors and nurses.

Even Orlu people who live abroad help carry their culture forward. Groups like Orlu Development Union organise events, write books, and create an online archive to keep culture alive.

Orlu in the Colonial and Postcolonial Eras When the British colonised Nigeria, Orlu became a centre for administration. They built a court, a school, and a market. The church, especially the Catholic Church, brought schools and Christianity. This helped raise many educated people who later joined the Nigerian independence struggle. The palm

oil trade also expanded at that time.

During the civil war, Orlu suffered, but it also contributed a lot to the Biafran side. After the war, people gathered strength and rebuilt, and Orlu returned as a business centre.

After Nigeria divided into new states in 1976 and created Imo State, Orlu position was strong before. The market grew, schools and hospitals increased, and many people moved in from other parts.

The Culture is still strong, but church problems and the modern lifestyle affect the old ways. Festivals like Iwa Ji are still ongoing, but they need more support to protect them. Craftwork like weaving has been reduced and needs revival.

There are lots of Opportunities. There are many schools, the market sells well, and the transport network helps trade. Promoting tourism, such as cultural festivals and history, will bring more money. Government plans to build an industrial market and fix the road can help bring investment. Orlu is an example of how Igbo people hustled, kept their culture, and survived anything. From trading town to Biafra stronghold and now one of Imo State's biggest cities, Orlu has shown they have strong roots. Markets, festivals, and schools will reflect tradition and modern life.

As the future approaches, Orlu needs to continue to preserve its culture. As the Igbo proverb says, Orlu has built a good foundation, and it will stand strong with generations to come.

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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.



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