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Oru People: *The Oru-Igbo and Their Aquatic Civilization*

By Idenze Ezeme

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FEATURE
IMAGE

**A noble woman from Ndoni, the
elephant tusk anklets is symbolic of
otu society which noble Oru women
partake in / Charles Alozie**

Article image · caption retained from the published Ozikoro article

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A titled Igbo woman, Ndoni, present day Rivers State, Nigeria. Lower Niger French Catholic mission postcard, turn of the 20th century.

Embedded within the cultural fabric of Igboland are the Oru people, a unique and distinct group within the larger Igbo ethnic family. The adage “Oru na Igbo bu ofu,” meaning “Oru and Igbo are one,” underscores a shared heritage; however, the Oru have cultivated their own riverine way of life, rich with distinct customs, beliefs, and livelihoods centered around their relationship with water. Shaped by history and the ebb and flow of rivers, the Oru’s journey is one of adaptation and transformation, born from their connection to both land and water, where tradition flows as deeply as the rivers beside them.



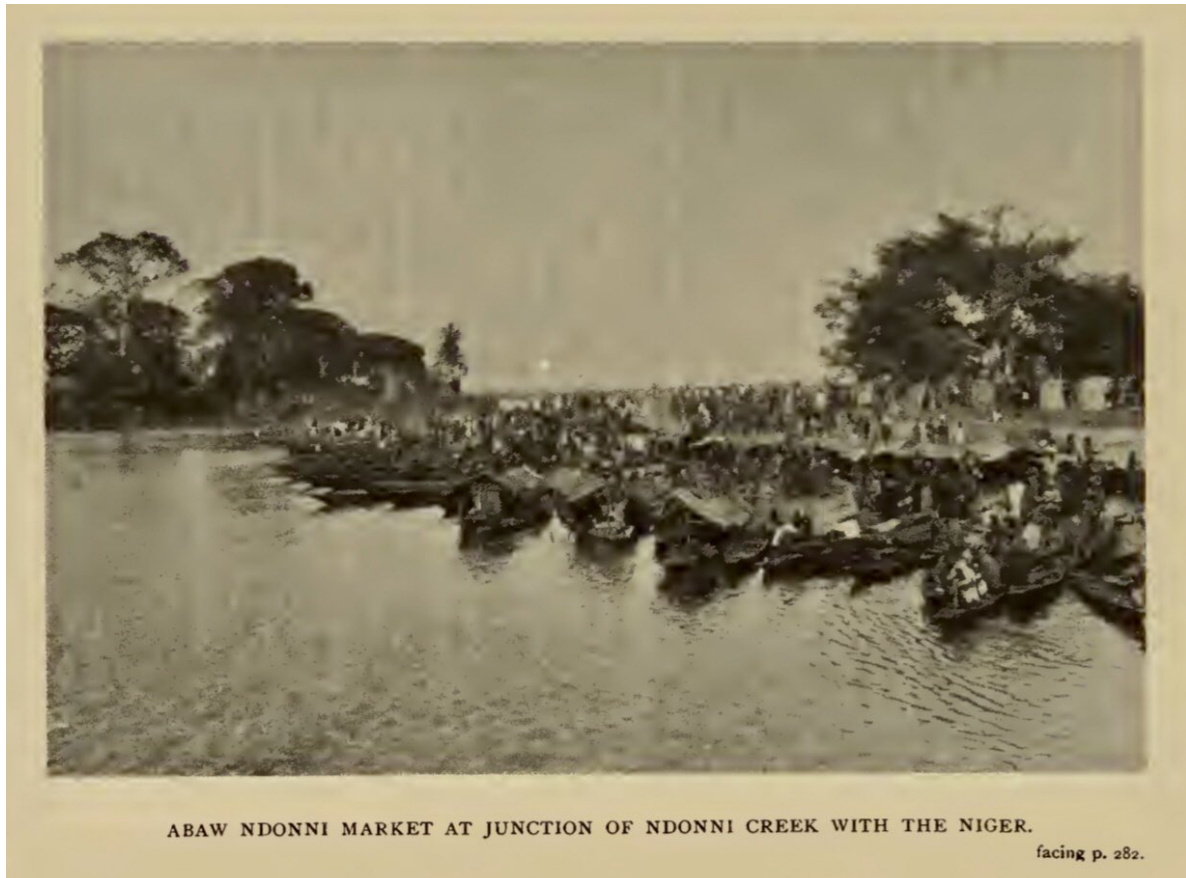
Oguta Lake / Charles Alozie

Oru-Igbo communities are stretched along the banks of the Niger River, reaching into major waterways like the Orashi and Omambala rivers. With a livelihood based on the water, these communities grew to be highly skilled fishermen and master canoe builders and thus were guardians of a very water-related culture. Indeed, the towns of Oguta, Aboh, Anam, and Ogbaru grew to become strong interacting and trading cultural centers, not only throughout the land but even

with their neighbors, the Igala, Benin, and Izon. These interactions only helped strengthen the culture and society of these people; Oru society was renowned for agricultural productivity, especially in yams and fish, and made a vital contribution to Igbo food resources.

The Oru-Igbo are eclectic in their traditions, which have come to shine through in everything from the culinary delights to music, even in the practice of social governance. Their towns were famous for “egwu amala”-a dance that dramatized the vibrancy of their riverine life-and plenty of food, notably fish and edible water plants. Whereas the Igbo of the interior conventionally avoided settling near any river, the Oru clung to riverbanks, building compact towns right at the edges of the waterways. The social structures of the Oru people are also a few highly respectful hierarchies, with titles such as: “Oduah” for the eldest male, “Ogene” for elder men. There is also the traditional greeting, “Ajie,” in respect for men showing their deeply held regard for tradition. Rituals and seasonal fishing festivals knit them as a community within ancestral spirits and life-giving waters that feed them.

The Oru-Igbo developed some of the earliest examples of centralized monarchical structures within Igbo society. Oru was ruled by Kings popularly known as “Obi” or “Ezeigwe” and were assisted by a council of titled elders-ndiche and ndiokpara. This balanced yet progressive governance model had the council acting in the interest of balancing the powers of the king to ensure communal representation in decision-making. Such a well-structured political framework later influenced other Igbo communities, propelling titles such as Iyase-Onowu, Onise, and Odogwu to enhance Igbo socio-political life.



Aboh Ndonni Market at junction of Ndonni Creek with the Niger" – P.A. Talbot.

Living at the meeting point of land and water, the Oru-Igbo combine the steady pace of farming with the flexibility of life by the rivers. As skilled navigators and traders, they spread their influence far beyond their lands, reaching out to Igbo society through trade, politics, and cultural exchange. The culture of the Oru-Igbo thus carries a testament to the struggling and adaptive history of people, mingling old customs with fresh ideas down through the generations. The Oru-Igbo are part of the larger Igbo people of Nigeria, a land that connects them with the water people who think deeply about the earth and the waterways.

An Overview of the Oru and Their Historic Movement

The term "Oru" or "Olu" does not trace back to a single ancestor, as the Oru people do not share a homogeneous origin. Instead, they consist of various Proto-Igbo groups who gradually moved eastward, adapting to a life by the water. Gradually, they spread over both the western and eastern banks of the Niger River, well deep into the

creeks of the Niger Delta from areas such as Sagbama, Mbiama, to Nembe, Odioma, and Biile. Many of these communities were later integrated into Ijaw tribes; however, the names remained “Oru,” which is now equally an Ijaw lexicon.

Other names for “Oru” include “Olu” in northern dialects; and over time, Oru communities have come to dominate the waterways from south of Idah down through areas such as Ebu, Illah, Ugboli, Oko, Nzam, and the Omambala river basin. The riverine Oru communities used the terms “Ogbashu” and “Ozizor”, where “Ogbashu” meant those paddling downriver with the current, and “Ozizor” meant upstream against the current. Oru communities that were located along the southern Niger River banks below Onitsha were collectively referred to as “Ogbashu,” which, though it is non-homogeneous, shares both cultural and historical ties among clans such as Ogba, Ndoni, Onya, Akarai, and Oguta.

One of the most ancient Proto-Igboid clans, Akarai lived along areas bordering what is now Ndokwa East in Delta State and Ogbaru in Anambra State. They were good fishermen and farmers. Their history is intertwined with Aboh, Omoku, and Ekpeye-Akarai-aka. Aboh was an Akarai fishing village, but after disagreements and turbulences around the Benin Kingdom, one Benin warlord Obazome, otherwise called Esumei, came to settle in Aboh, installing his lineage as the ruling class – Umudei, while the indigenous community assumed the Ndiche and Prime Ministerial roles.

Later, Aboh became an influential kingdom, extending influence over other Oru towns. Some Akarai fled across the Niger and went on to found settlements like Akili-Ozor, Akili-Atani, and Akili Ogidi. About this time, yet another clan from Illah went on to settle along the Ndoni River upstream from present-day Oguta. They subsequently moved inland and founded the town of Oguta near a lake known as Ogbuide or Uhamiri and now called Oguta Lake. These included the communities around Oguta Lake, such as Ameshi, Nnebukwu, Ezi-Orsu, Orsu-Obodo, Mgbele, Nkwesi, and Kalabari beach/ Aro quarters that were traditionally under one Ezeigwe of Oguta -Ameshi.



The Obi of Aboh Imegwu II / Edonationsatellite blog

The Oguta Lake area is joined by the Njaba River, flowing from the Igbo hinterlands, and the Orashi River running East to circle but never joining it. The Orashi River continued south to empty into the Atlantic Ocean between Degema and Abonnema. Other Oru settlements along the Orashi River are Ihiala, Egbema, Omoku, and Obiakpu. Being proximal to the Njaba River allowed for some Oguta Oru to move upstream toward the Isu heartland, where they introduced cultural practices such as Owu and Okoroshi, which were afterward assimilated by surrounding neighbors.

Oguta and Egbema, even in recent times, remain vital food sources of Imo State for fish and crops. The same way Oguta and Egbema LGAs are vital sources of foods for Imo State, Anambra West LGA, Ogbaru in Anambra State, and Ndoki in Abia State, equally contribute massively to regional supplies.

The Development of Kingship Institution in Oru-Igbo up to 1991

The saying “Igbo do not have kings” (Igbo enweeze) is arguably one most profound statements in Igbo proverbs, which testifies to the Igbo traditional principles of decentralised and communal governance. Yet, history has shown that kingship indeed occurred in some parts of Igboland, especially in communities where there has been some continuity in kingship from pre-colonial through post-colonial times. However, this cannot be generalized to all of Igboland; instead, only certain regions can be regarded as genuine custodians of the kingship institution as an enduring heritage from pre-colonial through post-colonial eras.

Ezeigwe (king/spiritual leader) of Ugwuta [Oguta] in a ceremonial robe, central Igboland, 1920s. [Postcard] This post looks into the institution of kingship among the Oru-Igbo people, who, unlike other Igbo groups, maintained kingship as part of their cultural heritage that has survived pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial times. Their knowledge and practice of kingship were indigenously deep, not borrowed from abroad. The relationship of the Oru-Igbo with their immediate neighbouring Igbo communities west of the Niger, now part of Delta State, and the people of Benin in Nigeria are also discussed here. Indeed, according to the oral traditions, this migration of Oru-Igbo from their said homelands called Ado na Idu in the 15th century forms one of the building blocks for their identity, symbolizing their linkage with Edo and Delta regions.

This post also examines what “Oru” represents as a distinctive cultural entity in Igbo land. These communities would rather prefer the self-designation as “Oru-Igbo” in distinction from the rest of other Igbo to show marked features such as kingship which they believe partake of the distinctive culture of the Oru people. The term “Oru” here must not be mixed up in meaning as “slave”; rather, Oru-Igbo here refers to the Riverine Igbo in Nigeria’s South-South and South-East regions.



king of Aboh on visit to British steam boats Engraving: London, Richard Bentley, 1837

Still, kingship development has not succeeded in making any of these communities deviate from their umbrella larger identity as Igbos. Though since the Nigerian-Biafran Civil War between 1967 and 1970, some eastern Igbo groups began adopting new cultural identities, the Oru-Igbo continued with their Igbo heritage despite having somewhat different cultural practices. This paper discusses how the sustained tradition of kingship in Oru-Igbo has forged their identity and culturally separated them from other Igbo communities east of the Niger, firmly guaranteeing them their peculiar place within the larger Igbo nation.

One of the most remarkable aspects of Oru-Igbo society over time has been its kingship institution. This institution has a long history, as it has existed for many years. According to the Oru-Igbo myth, the communities of Oru-Igbo needed their own kings when they left Benin to settle in Ado na Idu. This move was due to a conflict between the Ika-Igbo, who were non-indigenous to Benin, and the original people of Benin. Although many believe Benin was the origin of the Oru-Igbo, recent research suggests that Benin was just one of the places where Oru-Igbo people settled during their journey across Western Igboland

before colonial times. Benin's strong influence likely impacted the Oru-Igbo culture due to the interactions that occurred there.

In Ado na Idu and other regions of Western Igboland, the Oru-Igbo, like other groups, were known as the Ika-Igbo, which meant "non-Benin people." This term still connects the Oru-Igbo people to their unique identity, separate from other Igbo groups who did not have contact with Benin. Around 1401, the Onitsha group among the Oru-Igbo left Benin for Ado na Idu, leading to a gathering of various Ika-Igbo communities in that region. As a result, in 1461, the different Oru-Igbo communities decided to establish their own kingship systems. This was spurred by the conflicts of the 15th century and led the Oru-Igbo to migrate back to what is now the Oguta area in Imo State, Nigeria.

Many leaders of riverine kingdoms are said to have once lived in Benin, from where they left due to conflicts with the Benin Kingdom. Their journeys from Benin involved settling in multiple places before reaching their current locations. An example is the Oru-Igbo in Oguta and other neighboring communities such as Onitsha and Ogbaru who had established a monarchical system of government headed by an Obi or king.

However, the kings never ruled alone but were viewed as representatives of the communities, not absolute rulers. The king ruled supported by a council of respected title holders and advisors who balanced the governance system. This setup made it easier to govern since the king had to consult with his council before major decisions could be made.

The interactions of Oru-Igbo with other cultures, such as Benin, impacted the amazing kingship system that developed among them. Unlike other Igbo groups that may not have developed structured kingship, the Oru-Igbo maintained a monarchy system that encouraged smooth administration. This royal tradition was moulded by experiences in Benin, Ado na Idu, and other areas they once inhabited.

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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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