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The Influence of Igbo Women in Language and Cultural Exchange: *Insights from Colonial Anthropology*

By Idenze Ezeme

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This penetration of the Ibo country by Ishan customs is the more remarkable because, in the first place, the Ibo is, on the whole, little disposed, even when he is close to a linguistic frontier, to learn the language of his neighbours. East of the Niger, for example, I found a knowledge of Ibo extending fully one day's march into the Igara country, but no corresponding knowledge of Igara on the Ibo side of the

Northcote Thomas (1914). Anthropological Report on the Ibo-Speaking Peoples of Nigeria, Vol. IV: Law and Custom of the Ibo of the Asaba District, S. Nigeria, pp. 5

In his 1914 Anthropological Report on the Ibo-Speaking Peoples of Nigeria, British colonial anthropologist Northcote Thomas observed a fascinating dynamic in the Asaba District: Igbo women played a pivotal role in linguistic and cultural exchange across ethnic frontiers. He noted that while Igbo men showed little inclination to learn neighbouring languages like Igara or Ishan, Igbo women who married into non-Igbo communities often carried their language with them, fostering bilingualism in their children.

Thomas speculated that this phenomenon might explain why certain areas, such as Idumuje, had significant Igbo-speaking populations despite being outside traditional Igbo territory. He also documented cases where migrant communities, like the Igara in Asaba, abandoned their native tongues over time, possibly due to the influence of



Igbo-speaking wives.

This pattern extends beyond Nigeria's borders. The linguistic dominance of Igbo in places like Bonny—initially an Ibani-Ijo island—may owe much to Igbo women's cultural transmission. Similarly, the prevalence of Igbo-derived vocabulary in Caribbean English creoles suggests that enslaved Igbo women disproportionately shaped these languages, possibly because they were more likely to teach their children Igbo while labor regimes isolated men.

Even today, the legacy of Igbo maternal influence persists in Nigeria's Delta region, where communities like the Kalabari and Andoni frequently intermarry with Igbo women from present-day Abia State, reinforcing cultural and linguistic ties. Thomas's century-old notes thus hint at a broader truth: women, often overlooked in colonial ethnography, were key agents of language preservation and change.

- Northcote Thomas (1914). *Anthropological Report on the Ibo-Speaking Peoples of Nigeria, Vol. IV: Law and Custom of the Ibo of the Asaba District, S. Nigeria*, pp. 5–6.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Idenze Ezeme

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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