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## HISTORICAL STUDIES

# The Name “Anambra” Is Not New: *A Look at Its Indigenous and Colonial Origins*

By Idenze Ezeme

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FEATURE  
IMAGE

**An Igbo man from Achala, p.d.  
Anambra State, photographed by  
British colonial government  
anthropologist Northcote Thomas,  
1910-1911. Museum of Archaeology  
and Anthropology, Cambridge.**

Article image · caption retained from the published Ozikoro article

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# The Name “Anambra” Is Not New: A Look at Its Indigenous and Colonial Origins

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**M**any believe “Anambra” is a recent invention created during Nigeria’s post-colonial period. However, historical records prove that variations of the name—such as “Anambara” and “Anambala”—were in use long before British rule. These earlier versions reflect the Indigenous Igbo pronunciation. The spelling “Anambra” is simply a colonial adaptation of the traditional name.

## *Early Mention of Anambara in 1898*

One of the earliest written records of “Anambara” appears in *Imperial Africa: The Rise, Progress and Future of the British Possessions in Africa* by Augustus Ferryman Mockler-Ferryman (1898). On page 328, the book mentions “Anambara,” proving that the name was used before the British fully established their colonial administration in Nigeria. This contradicts claims that the name was a modern invention and shows that it had already been recorded in historical texts over a century ago.



ivory, copper, brass, or glass;<sup>1</sup> armlets (worn above the elbow) of the same materials—more usually seen on the men than on the women; and, in the matter of anklets, we may mention three curious varieties worn by the women of different tribes of the Niger Delta. The wealthier of the trading women wear massive anklets<sup>2</sup> of ivory, formed from a hollowed tusk, through which the foot has to be passed before it has stopped growing. The weight of the ivory is, of course, very considerable, but it is nothing in comparison with the weight of the anklets worn by the girls and women of the Anambara country; those of the former consist of brass rods<sup>3</sup> formed into a huge spiral spring from ankle to knee; while those of the latter are even more cumbersome, being cymbal-like plates of brass, often more than a foot in diameter. These are welded round the woman's ankles on her marriage, and are never removed, causing her to walk with a most awkward gait, and allowing her but little comfort in life. Necklaces, bracelets, anklets, and other ornaments, however, are not worn entirely for the purpose of beautifying the person, but usually as a charm against one or other of the various evil spirits which infest the land<sup>4</sup> and on

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### *The Indigenous Name: Anambara and Anambala*

"Anambara" and "Anambala" are indigenous names the Igbo people have long used. The name comes from the river now called the Anambra River, which was traditionally known as Omambala. This river was historically significant for trade, agriculture, and settlement. Since Igbo was primarily an oral language before colonial contact, variations in spelling occurred when indigenous names were written down. This explains why different versions—Anambara, Anambala, and later Anambra—appeared in historical records.

Before colonial rule, the region now known as Anambra was home to powerful Igbo societies. The Kingdom of Nri, which existed for over a thousand years, was one of the most influential precolonial Igbo states. Other major towns like Onitsha, Awka, and Aguleri were important centres of trade, culture, and governance.

*Archaeological Findings in the Region Confirm its Deep Historical Significance. Notable Sites Include:*

- Igbo-Ukwu: Famous for its sophisticated bronze works, dating as far back as the 9th century CE. These artefacts demonstrate advanced metalworking skills and long-distance trade networks.



An Igbo-Ukwu pot. Photo: Akweyatu

1959-60 Excavation team at Igbo-Ukwu Photo: Pamela Jane Smith

- **Ezira:** Known for its iron-smelting technology, the Ezira site shows evidence of early industrial activities in the region. Artefacts from this site provide insights into the technological and socio-economic practices of the precolonial Igbo people.
- **Ogbunike Caves:** Located in Ogbunike, these caves have been used for centuries and hold spiritual significance for the local people. The site features a network of caves and tunnels with streams and a large colony of bats, making it an important cultural and natural heritage site.
- **Ihiala:** Is an important archaeological site known for its early human settlements. Excavations have revealed evidence of tool-making and other activities dating back to ancient times, contributing to the understanding of the early development of the Igbo people.

Given its economic and cultural significance, it is likely that traders, travellers, and missionaries used the name “Anambara” to describe the region long before British officials documented it. The name was not an invention of colonial administrators but a long-standing indigenous term.

The claim that “Anambra” is a modern name is incorrect. Historical records, such as Mockler-Ferryman’s *Imperial Africa* (1898), prove

that “Anambara” was already used in the 19th century. The change in spelling over time resulted from different attempts to write down the name, not from British mispronunciation.

Additionally, archaeological discoveries in Igbo-Ukwu, Ezira, Ogbunike, and Ihiala confirm the region’s long-standing historical and cultural importance. This evidence shows that Anambra is not a recent creation but a name deeply rooted in Igbo history.

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#### 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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