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The Riverine Igbo People: *Culture, Economy, and History of the Water-Loving Communities around River Niger*

By Chukwunwike Ossai

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FEATURE
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Oguta Lake / Charles Alozie

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The Riverine Igbos are a distinct group of people within the Igbo tribe, one of the largest ethnic groups in Africa. They live in riverine areas, especially around River Niger and its branches. What makes them different from other Igbo people is that they don't adapt to life surrounded by water. This affects how they live, work, relate and worship. Let's delve into their history, culture, religion, how they make their money and the problems they are facing today.

Riverine Igbo are primarily based in areas where rivers flow. They include:

1. Delta State: Especially in the Anioma area, towns like Asaba, Owa-Oyibu, and Aboh. 2. Anambra State: places like Onitsha that exists in Niger river area. 3. Rivers State: Places like Ogba and Ahoada. 4. Imo and Abia State: Some towns closed to Niger Delta Area like Oguta.

They live in swampy areas with rivers, wetlands, and dense bush. This is one reason they are skilled at fishing, farming, and trading in wet places. They have different subgroups like:

1. Anioma/Western Igbo: people from Delta State, like Ika and Aboh. 2. Southern Igbo: People from Rivers and Imo, like Ogba. 3. Riverine Igbo: People who reside in towns like Onicha, Igbuzor

For thousands of years, they have been living in their places. River

Niger was the reason for their complete settlement because it helped them in trading, fishing and travelling. In history, Aboh and Onitsha were the largest trading towns before the arrival of the whites. They traded palm oil, fish, and even took part in the slave trade.

When the British people colonised Nigeria, they controlled the Riverine Igbo area so fast because they had no king in the position of ruling everyone. They brought in both the church and the schools. Towns like Aboh became important for the British Palm oil Business.

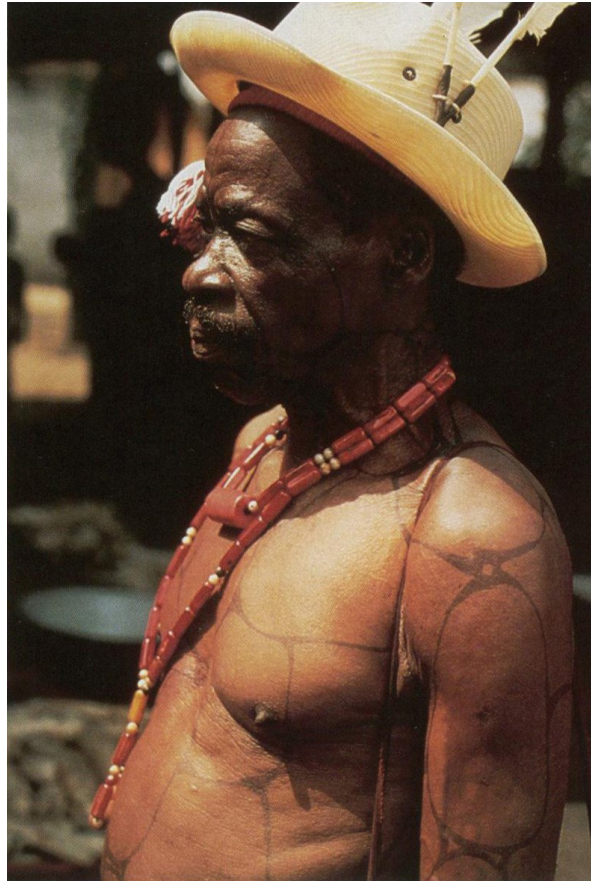
When Biafra tried leaving Nigeria in 1967, the riverine Igbo joined them. The civil war that followed (1967-1970) killed plenty of people, mostly from hunger. After the war, riverine areas suffered again because oil pollution destroyed their land and water. Most people began moving to cities or even abroad.

Riverine Igbo still held Igbos' culture strong, but also had what made them different:

1. Language: They speak different Igbo dialects, such as Enuani (on the Onitsha side), Ukwuani (Aboh), and Ogba (in Rivers State). 2. Social Life: They live in village groups. They use age grades, title societies, and village meetings to accomplish things. 3. Men do yam farming while women plant Cassava, Cocoyam, and do marketing. Women also have a big say in politics. Some towns have Male and Female leaders. Like (Omu)

1. Village Democracy: All elders gather to decide matters. 2. Monarchy system: Towns like Aboh and Onicha have a king (obi or eze), but people still participate in decision-making.

If problems arise, they swear by their juju or rather call on their Gods to reveal the truth. Women also have their courts and societies that handle matters related to women and the market.



Uli body painting of a titled Igbo man from Mgbala Agwa in the Oguta Area, Imo State, Nigeria, 1983. Photo: Liz Willis.

1. Masquerade and mask dance: They have a special mask used in the ceremony. 2. Bronze work: Like what they found in Igbo-Ukwu. 3. Uli-art: Women use plant dyes to draw fine designs on their bodies and walls. 4. Pottery and weaving: Women do this and also sell them in the market.

Work And What They Eat. 1. Farming and fishing: Yams, Cassava, and fish are their main sources of food. 2. Market: Women sell fish food, clothing, and other goods. 3. Oil Business: Since oil is found in their land, money still comes, but problems still stand- land and rivers are dirty, fish die, and people are angry because they are not seeing the value of having oil in their lands



Symbol of Ala, the Earth Mother, at Bende. P. A. Talbot, c. 1920s.

1. Traditional belief (Omenala/Odinala): They believe in God, Ala (the earth goddess), and ancestral spirits. River gods still have power in their belief. 2. Priestess and Traditional men: They lead ritual and sacrifice. 3. Christianity: Almost all Riverine Igbos are now Christians, but some still blend church practices with traditional beliefs. 4. Islam: Few of them are Muslim, especially in town.

1. Oil pollution: Rivers and land are no longer good because they lack fish. 2. Political problems: Some people still support Biafran movements, such as IPOB and MASSOB. 3. Migration: Due to leadership, many people moved to Lagos, Abuja, and even outside Nigeria. 4. Cultural loss: Christianity and city life now cause people to forget some old traditions, but groups like Igbo Heritage have tried to revive them.



Right: Ofo from Anam, present-day Anambra state, Nigeria. Made of wood and iron. Length: 52.7 cm. Left: Ofo from Aguleri, present-day Anambra state, Nigeria. Length: 90 cm. Collected by M.D.W. Jeffreys in 1930 in Aguleri. Photographed by Jerome L. Joss.

Riverine Igbo still respect the ofo, that sacred stick that represents truth, justice, and power.

1. Governance: Kings, chiefs, and elders hold Ofo to show that they have authority. 2. Judgment: People swear on oath to prove their innocence or the truth. 3. Spiritual matter: Priests and priestess uses Ofo to communicate with the gods. 4. Women's power: women like Omu and priestesses have the power to hold Ofo too, demonstrating their rank and capacity.

The Riverine Igbo People are true Igbos who adapted to life by the river. They are traders, farmers and fishers who know how to maintain their culture despite problems. Even as Oil challenges and migration have become a problem for them, they still stand out to shine in Nigeria and abroad. The ofo shows that truth and tradition still exist in their heart.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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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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