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The Umu Eze Chima Lineage and the Historical Evolution of Onicha Settlements

By Chuka Odike

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FEATURE
IMAGE

Photo with no context, likely Igbo men from Onicha (Onitsha), photographed by Henry Crosse in the late 19th century. MAA Cambridge.

Article image · caption retained from the published Ozikoro article

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The story of Onicha settlements, deeply rooted in the heritage of the Umu Eze Chima lineage, is a significant part of Igbo history. These settlements trace their origins to Eze Chima, a patriarch whose migration from the western region of present-day Nigeria catalyzed the formation of numerous communities. Among these, Onicha Ugbo (now in Delta State) and Onicha Mmili (commonly known as Onitsha) stand out as prominent settlements.

01

The Migration of Eze Chima

Eze Chima's migration is a tale of exploration and establishment. Oral traditions suggest that Eze Chima, accompanied by his followers, embarked on a journey from the west due to disputes or territorial expansion ambitions coming from the west.. This journey resulted in the establishment of multiple settlements known today as the Umu Eze Chima settlements.



Pillars at the entrance of an iba ancestral house at Onicha (Onitsha), Nigeria. Zbigniew Dmochowski, 1960s.

The westward legacy of Eze Chima remains evident in communities such as Onicha Ugbo, Onicha Olona, Onicha Ukwu, and others, primarily located in present-day Delta State. These settlements exhibit shared linguistic, cultural, and genealogical traits that emphasize their common origin.

02

Onicha Mmili: The Largest of the Umu Eze Chima Settlements

Onicha Mmili, colloquially known as Onitsha, emerged as the most prominent of the Umu Eze Chima settlements. Its strategic location east of the River Niger set it apart from its sister communities, most of which were situated west of the river.



In Onicha Olona, a western Igbo town, two individuals in the courtyard of a house with what seems to be blacksmithing tools (tongs and hammers). Photographed by Northcote Thomas, 1912. MAA Cambridge.

Initially established as Enu Onicha, the settlement was perched on higher ground. Over time, the community expanded toward the river, forming Otu Onicha. This riverside location became a pivotal factor in Onitsha's development. During the colonial period, the port at Otu Onicha became a hub for river trade, attracting merchants, missionaries, and administrators.

The combination of trade opportunities and administrative significance led to the rapid urbanization of Onitsha. By the mid-20th century, Onitsha had transformed into a major economic and cultural center, far surpassing other Umu Eze Chima settlements in size and influence.



Sister Settlements

Obior, Issele-Uku, Issele-Mkpitime, Issele Azagba, Obomkpa, Onicha Olona, Onicha Ugbo, Onicha Ukwu, Ezi and Ike-Onicha, All located in Delta State, remains a vital part of the Umu Eze Chima lineage. Although other Onicha settlements have not attained the urban prominence of Onitsha (Onicha Mmili), they all retain Onicha historical and cultural significance. These community, like its counterpart, continues to celebrate its ancestral connection to Eze Chima.



An Igbo woman photographed by Northcote Thomas, Onicha Olona, 1912. Onicha Olona (now in Delta State) is one of the sister settlements to Onicha Mmili ('Onitsha') as part of the Umu Eze Chima (or Chime) lineage, a lineage of the patriarch Eze Chima who travelled from the west.



Other Known Onicha Settlements

The various towns bearing the name “Onicha,” across Igboland whether as a prefix or suffix, may share historical links with the original Onicha settlement. It is plausible that many of the Onicha communities east of the Niger existed before those established during the reverse migration led by Eze Chima. This reverse migration likely involved Igbo people who had earlier relocated to the Benin Kingdom in search of opportunities but were compelled to return eastward during the 16th-century displacement in Benin. It is logical that migrants move back to their homelands when things go south. The eastward wave of migration represents a fascinating chapter in the interplay of migration, settlement, and cultural identity among the Igbo people.

1. Onicha Nwegu – Located in Ebonyi State, near the Cross River Basin.
2. Onicha Igboeze – A prominent community in Ebonyi State, known for its agricultural activities.
3. Onicha Amagunze – Found in Enugu State, part of Nkanu East Local Government Area.
4. Onicha Enugu Ezike – Situated in Enugu State, near the northern Igbo-speaking areas.
5. Onicha Isu – Situated in Ebonyi State, near the southeastern Igbo-speaking areas.
6. Onicha Ihitte/Uboma – Situated in Imo State, near the southern Igbo-speaking areas.



7. Onicha: A Local Government Area in Ebonyi State, comprising towns such as Onicha Igboeze, Oshiri, Abaomege, Ukawu, Isu, and Isinkwo.
8. Onicha Amakpu: A village in Onicha Local Government Area, Ebonyi State.
9. Onicha Ukwuani: A community in Ndokwa West Local Government Area, Delta State.
10. Onicha Uburu: A village in Ohaozara Local Government Area, Ebonyi State.
11. Onicha Agu: A village in Igbo Eze North Local Government Area, Enugu State.
12. Onicha Ezinihitte: A community in Ezinihitte Mbaise Local Government Area, Imo State.
13. Onicha Uboma: A town in Ihitte/Uboma Local Government Area, Imo State.
14. Onicha Nkwubor: A village near Emene in Enugu East Local Government Area, Enugu State.
15. Onicha Ngwa: A community in Isiala Ngwa South Local Government Area, Abia State.
16. Onicha Obioha: A village in Nkanu West Local Government Area, Enugu State.
17. Onicha Owo: A community in Nkanu East Local Government Area, Enugu State.
18. Onicha Agu Ezimo: A village in Udenu Local Government Area, Enugu State.



These towns and villages highlight the widespread presence of “Onicha” in place names throughout Igboland, each with its unique history and cultural significance.

05

The Umu Eze Chima Legacy

The legacy of Eze Chima and his descendants is one of resilience, adaptability, and cultural richness. The settlements founded by this lineage have played key roles in shaping Igbo history and identity. Onitsha, as the largest and most urbanized, serves as a beacon of the lineage’s enduring relevance.

06

Conclusion

The story of Onicha settlements is a testament to the dynamic interplay of migration, geography, and cultural identity. From the western origins of Eze Chima to the bustling city of Onitsha, East of the Niger, this history underscores the importance of lineage and legacy in shaping the present. Today, the Umu Eze Chima settlements continue to celebrate their shared heritage while adapting to modern realities.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chuka Odiike

I'm a dedicated civil engineer with a passion for infrastructure development and community empowerment. With a strong background in engineering, my work focuses on creating sustainable solutions for urban and rural development projects. Outside of my professional career, I'm deeply interested in Igbo history and culture. I actively explores ways to impact society by using historical lessons to inspire and educate others about the rich cultural heritage of the Igbo people, aiming to bridge tradition and modern development.



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