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Tracing Ancient Migrations: *The Green Sahara, Eri, and the Roots of Southern Nigerian Civilizations*

By Chuka Odike

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FEATURE
IMAGE

**Map of Africa showing the Green
Sahara before and after. Photo
credits: Robert Schneiker.**

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In the lush greenery, expansive lakes, and thriving communities—thousands of years ago during the Neolithic Subpluvial, a period when the now-arid desert was a fertile savanna. This “Green Sahara,” which periodically transforms every few thousand years due to Earth’s axial tilt, was a cradle for ancient populations until its drying around 3000 BCE forced migrations southward. In Southern Nigeria, oral traditions like the story of Eri among the Umueri-Umunri-Igbo speak of ancestors migrating from the north, bringing agriculture and political structures. Could these stories echo the mass migrations triggered by the Sahara’s desertification? Let’s explore how the retreat of the Green Sahara, the Nok civilization, the Bantu expansion, and the linguistic clues of “Igbo/Ugbo” weave a speculative narrative of ancient migrations along the Niger and Cross Rivers, shaping the dense, innovative societies of Igboland and beyond.

01

The Green Sahara: A Lost Eden and Its Collapse

From around 10,000 to 3000 BCE, the Neolithic Subpluvial transformed the Sahara into a verdant landscape, supporting large populations with lakes—like an expansive Lake Chad—and abundant

wildlife, as evidenced by petroglyphs depicting giraffes and cattle. This period, driven by a 41,000-year cycle of Earth's axial tilt, made the Sahara a hub for early agriculturalists. However, as the climate dried, these communities were forced to migrate, seeking fertile lands near reliable water sources like the Niger and Cross Rivers in what is now Nigeria. Archaeological evidence, such as pottery dated to 3000–2500 BCE in Nsukka and Afikpo, suggests early settlements in Igboland, potentially linked to these migrations.
<https://ozikoro.com/lejja-sacred-site-nsukka-enugu/>

The Nok civilization, flourishing from 1500 BCE to 1 BCE in central Nigeria, may represent one of the last vestiges of Green Sahara cultures. Known for its terracotta figures and early iron use, Nok's agricultural practices and proximity to the Niger-Benue confluence indicate a society that thrived on fertile riverbanks as the Sahara dried. Some scholars suggest Nok peoples migrated from the Central Sahara, bringing pearl millet and pottery, supporting the idea of a southward push driven by environmental change.

02

Eri and Oduduwa Myths: Echoes of Ancient Migrations

Southern Nigerian oral traditions often feature patriarchs migrating from the north, bringing civilization. The story of Eri, the progenitor of the Umueri-Umunri-Igbo in Anambra State, describes him traveling from the north to the confluence of the Omambala (Anambra) and Niger Rivers. Guided by Chi, the supreme essence, and taught by the four primordial spirits—Eke, Oye, Afo, Nkwo—Eri introduced agriculture, divination, and trade, establishing the foundations of Igbo society. This narrative aligns with the idea of agriculturalists following rivers southward as the Sahara dried, clinging to water sources for survival.

Similarly, the Yoruba-Benin story of Oduduwa recounts a founder arriving from the northeast—possibly linked to the Niger—bringing religion and political structure. Oduduwa’s story includes encounters with aboriginal peoples, termed “Igbo” or “Ugbo,” who were either integrated or expelled. While these “Igbo/Ugbo” are not the modern Igbo, the term’s recurrence in Southern Nigerian languages—meaning forest, farm, or ancient people—hints at a shared linguistic root. For example, “ugbo” means farm in Igbo, and “igbo” means bush in Yoruba, suggesting a common ancestral term for hinterland dwellers, possibly the aboriginal populations met by migrating groups.

03

Igbo/Ugbo: Linguistic Clues to a Shared Mother

The Igbo, Yoruba, Edo, Fon, and Ewe may share a migration history, meeting similar aboriginal communities—the “Igbo/Ugbo.” This term could be a cognate originally meaning “forest” or “hinterland,” later applied to the indigenous peoples encountered. These groups might represent a shared “mother” culture, with linguistic and cultural links—like the Igboid language cluster—stemming from this interaction. The “fathers,” migrating agriculturalists from the north, brought distinct traditions, such as the political structures attributed to Eri and Oduduwa, creating a blend of influences. Genetic studies showing small amounts of Khoi-San-like ancestry in some Igbo populations suggest this region may have sheltered ancient foragers before agriculturalists arrived, possibly shielded by the equatorial forest belt.

<https://ozikoro.com/african-genome-sample-of-igbo-mixing-with-khoi-san-around-9000-years-ago/>

04

Rivers as Lifelines: The Niger, Cross River, and Bantu Expansion

The Niger and Cross Rivers likely served as migration routes, funneling populations southward. Archaeological sites in Igboland, like Lejja in Enugu State, reveal iron smelting dating to 2000 BCE, indicating early technological innovation. This area's high population density—among the densest in Africa—may reflect intense competition as waves of migrants sought fertile land, a theory supported by historian Robert D. Jackson (1975). The Bantu expansion, starting around 2000 BCE near the Nigeria-Cameroon border, could also be linked to this population pressure. As agriculturalists fled the drying Sahara, competition for resources may have pushed Bantu-speaking groups south and east, spreading farming and iron technology across sub-Saharan Africa.

05

Genetic Echoes: Ramses III and West African Connections

DNA analysis of ancient Egyptian mummies, like Ramses III, shows genetic links to West African populations, supporting the idea of intermingling in the Green Sahara before its drying. These populations, dispersing along rivers, may have carried shared ancestry to both the Nile Valley and West Africa, influencing the genetic makeup of modern Igbo, Yoruba, and others.

A Legacy of Innovation and Density

Igbo land's history of innovation—evidenced by early iron finds at Lejja—and its dense population may stem from its role as a migration “funnel.” The region's susceptibility to change, noted in Igbo cultural adaptability, could reflect this history of competition and integration. Today, these ancient migrations continue to shape Southern Nigeria's cultural landscape, a testament to the enduring impact of the Green Sahara's retreat.

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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR****Chuka Odi**

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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