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Unraveling the Origins of Idu: *A Fresh Look at Ado Na Idu*

By Chuka Odike

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UNRAVELING THE ORIGINS OF IDU

Unraveling the Origins of Idu: A Fresh Look at Ado Na Idu

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A thriving settlement along the Lower Niger, known as Idu or Ado Na Idu, bustling with life until an invasion scatters its people, sparking migrations that would shape communities like Onitsha. Recent discussions, paired with historical maps and anthropological evidence, are challenging long-held narratives about Idu's origins, suggesting it was an independent Igbo settlement—not a Benin outpost—before its dispersal. This article delves into the location, history, and cultural significance of Idu, exploring the Ezechima migration, Benin's role, and the enduring legacy of Igbo settlements west of the Niger.

01

The Location and Identity of Idu: A New Perspective

Idu, often referred to as Ado Na Idu, is believed to have been situated between Igbodo and Onicha-Ugbo. While Baikie's 1854 Mercator map of the Lower Niger places Ado from West of Asaba to Uburubu and possibly extending into Emu in Esanland, These sources, supported by anthropologists like Mockler-Ferryman, argue that Idu was an Igbo settlement before its invasion by Benin forces. The name "Ado Na Idu," meaning "Ado and Idu" in Igbo, reflects a distinct identity tied to the Igbo people, not the Edo (Benin) as some narratives suggest. This challenges the idea that Idu was a Benin territory, proposing instead that it was a tributary region or an independent entity that faced conquest.

02

The Benin Invasion and the Dispersal of Idu

The turning point for Idu came with a Benin invasion, likely during the expansionist campaigns of Oba Esigie (c. 1504–1550), as noted in oral traditions. This event, described in Igbo folk tales as “Agha Idu n’Oba” (the Idu-Oba War), led to the dispersal of its people. Nnamdi Azikiwe on his book highlights a specific account where a leader, possibly Ezechima, led over 5,000 soldiers and met the Ado Na Idu at a village near Igbodo, indicating a significant conflict that scattered the population. The invasion aligns with broader patterns of Benin’s eastward expansion, which displaced many Igbo-speaking communities along the Niger.

03

Ezechima’s Migration: A Quest for Freedom

Ezechima, a central figure in this narrative, is often linked to the founding of Onitsha Ado N’Idu and other Anioma communities. Oral traditions describe him as a leader who fled Benin after a dispute, possibly with Oba Esigie, over a kingship issue or the slighting of a shrine. Some accounts liken Ezechima’s exodus to Moses leading the Israelites, framing it as a quest for freedom rather than a forced migration into slavery. Ezechima’s journey eastward across the Niger River led to the establishment of settlements like Onitsha, Onicha-Olona, Onicha-Ugbo, Issele-Ukwu, etc. While some traditions claim Benin origins for Ezechima, scholars like Victor Uchendu, J. N. Oriji, Northcote Thomas, Onwuejeogwu, J. Henderson, etc, argues his Igbo identity, pointing to names like “Chima” and “Eze,” which are

distinctly Igbo.

04

Anthropological and Historical Evidence

Anthropological evidence supports the Igbo identity of Idu. Northcote Thomas, a colonial anthropologist, suggested that Ezechima and his followers originated near Onicha-Ugbo and Igbo country, not Benin. The Thomas and Leonard hypothesis, corroborated by Baikie's map, places Idu west of Asaba, reinforcing its Igbo roots. Additionally, the presence of Igbo cultural markers—like linguistic patterns and naming conventions—in Anioma communities further challenges the Benin-centric narrative. While some Onitsha and other Western Igbo communities practices some Benin leadership systems, this is attributed to cultural exchange during migration, not a Benin origin.

05

Rethinking the Narrative: Idu as an Igbo Stronghold

The question of why Benin would invade Idu if it was already part of their empire is a critical one. Many scholars account that Idu was likely an independent or tributary Igbo settlement, not a core part of Benin, making it a target for conquest during Benin's expansion. This perspective aligns with the broader history of Igbo migrations, which predate Benin's influence. Archaeological evidence, such as early settlements in Igboland dating to 6000 BCE, suggests a deep Igbo presence in the region long before the 16th-century Benin incursions.

The Legacy of Idu and Igbo Settlements

The dispersal of Idu led to the founding of numerous Igbo settlements, including Onitsha, which became a major trade center along the Lower Niger. These migrations highlight the resilience of the Igbo people, who adapted to new environments while preserving their cultural identity. Today, the debate over Idu's origins continues to spark interest, offering a fresh lens on Igbo-Benin relations and the complex history of the Igbo-speaking people. The story of Idu is a testament to the enduring spirit of the Igbo, whose migrations and settlements continue to shape the region's cultural landscape.

Ohadike, D. C. (1994). *Anioma: A social history of the Western Igbo people*. Ohio University Press.

Henderson, R. N. (1972). *The king in every man: Evolutionary trends in Onitsha Ibo society and culture*. Yale University Press.

Northcote Thomas, N. W. (1913). *Anthropological report on the Ibo-speaking peoples of Nigeria*. Harrison and Sons.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chuka Odike

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 explore 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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