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War Towers of Igbo Compounds: *Guardians of a Troubled Past*

By Chuka Odike

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FEATURE
IMAGE

A war tower built by a man identified as Dike Madueke in Umudike, Ukpòr, is one of the last of the towers still standing.

Article image · caption retained from the published Ozikoro article

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A tower like this was used in the Igbo hinterland for defensive purposes specifically in the Anambra area during the era of the slave trade, an area which was ravaged by raiders coming mostly from the east. Most towers are gone today. Photo: Awka Nibo Nise, Zbigniew Dmochowski.

During the Atlantic slave trade, Igbo communities in southeastern Nigeria faced unprecedented threats especially north-central Igboland. Raids and kidnappings became commonplace as slavers sought captives to fuel the transatlantic human trade. In response, the Igbo people developed a unique architectural feature: war towers. Known locally as “obuna enu or ụnọ aja”, these towers were a testament to the resilience and ingenuity of the Igbo in the face of adversity.



Awka, Nibo, Nise. Compound of Nwankwo Irienzuo. House with tower in the background.” Zbigniew Dmochowski.

01

Origins and Purpose of War Towers

The war towers emerged as a defensive innovation, allowing families to safeguard themselves from raiding parties. These two-storey

structures, often constructed from earth and other locally sourced materials, were strategically built within walled family compounds (obi). From their elevated positions, inhabitants could monitor the surrounding areas for potential threats. The towers often featured gun holes, enabling defenders to repel invaders from a safe vantage point.

Photographs taken by British colonial anthropologist Northcote Thomas during the early 1910s provide a rare glimpse into these structures. One notable image shows a tower in Öka (Awka), underscoring the prevalence of these defensive buildings in the Igbo hinterland. Another image, colourised in 2018, captures a tower in the Ögbü compound, further highlighting the architectural legacy of these defensive measures (Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge, 2018).



Ögbü compound and tower, Anambra State today, photographed by Northcote Thomas, May 1911, colourised, Úkpúru 2018.

02

War Towers as Multi-Functional Structures

Beyond their defensive role, war towers served as versatile spaces for family use. In times of peace, the upper floors often became a retreat for the family patriarch or were repurposed as storage areas. However, during emergencies, these floors transformed into sanctuaries for entire families, offering refuge until the threat subsided.

The remains of such towers continue to evoke their historical significance. One of the last standing examples is a war tower built by Dike Madueke in Umudike, Ukpör. This tower, along with others documented by Zbigniew Dmochowski, such as the structure in the compound of Nwankwo Iriezuo in Awka Nibo Nise, showcases the architectural ingenuity and resilience of the Igbo people (Dmochowski, 1990).

03

Decline and Preservation Efforts

Over time, the decline of the slave trade and changing social conditions rendered war towers obsolete. Many of these structures have since deteriorated or disappeared entirely. However, their legacy endures in archival photographs and scholarly works. Efforts to document and preserve these architectural relics are vital for understanding the socio-cultural history of the Igbo people.

Dmochowski's isometric drawings and photographs, alongside Northcote Thomas' fieldwork, provide invaluable records of these towers. The colourisation efforts by Úkpúru in 2018 further bring

these historical structures to life, bridging the past and present for modern audiences.



Another Igbo tower or two-storey earth building photographed by Northcote Thomas. Öka (Awka), c. 1910-11. MAA Cambridge.

04

Conclusion

The war towers of Igbo compounds are not merely architectural artifacts; they are enduring symbols of a people's resilience in the face of existential threats. They reflect a time when survival necessitated ingenuity, adaptability, and unity. As most of these structures have faded into history, preserving their stories and studying their significance is essential for honoring the resourcefulness of the Igbo people.

Dmochowski, Z. (1990). An introduction to Nigerian traditional

architecture (Vol. 3). Ethnographica.

Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (MAA), Cambridge. (2018). Photographs by Northcote Thomas, 1910–1911. Retrieved from archival collections.

Northcote Thomas, N. (1910–1911). Photographs of Igbo architectural heritage: Öka and Ögbü compounds. Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology Archives.

Úkpúru. (2018). Colourised images of Igbo war towers: A photographic exploration. Social media documentation.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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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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