

IN SEARCH OF IGBO IDENTITY

Language, Culture and Politics in Nigeria, 1900-1966

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Preface

The subject of this study is the search for identity by Igbo people in Nigeria. It is of course also my own search, not only for Igbo identity, but also for a more general understanding of questions of identity. To explain why Igbo identity developed the way it did, I analyze the complex individual, social and political relations in the Nigerian colonial state. These provided not merely the context for the search for Igbo identity, but also to a large extent determined its intellectual conclusions. The same can be argued for my own search and conclusions. However, although I realise that the social and political context in which I created this book has shaped its outcome, it has been specific individuals around me whose impact I have felt most. Without them, my search would have led nowhere.

My interest in Igbo identity was raised when, as an M.A. student, I was writing a paper on the slave trade for a course on West African history. Gradually, my interest shifted away from my initial question of 'who were these Igbo slaves?' to 'how did these slaves become Igbo?'. I am grateful to the supervisor of my M.A. thesis for encouraging me to develop the topic into a Ph.D. research proposal. With the support from the Research School CNWS, I embarked on my search and soon found myself in libraries and archives in Leiden, Oegstgeest, London, Oxford and Birmingham, collecting material for this study.

My search took me to Nigeria, where I benefitted from the support of more people than I can possibly mention, here I would like to thank them all for welcoming me and sharing a small part of their lives with me. However, there are some people I want to thank especially: Prof. Adiele Afigbo, Dr. Azuka Dike, Dr. Lawrence Emeka, Prof. Nolue Emenanjo, Prof. Dan Obikeze, Prof. Simon Ottenberg and Dr. Obiora Udechukwu who discussed my research with me and helped me in many ways. I would also like to thank Sylvester Awudu, Anayo Enechukwu, Father Emmanuel Idika, Clifford Ham, Johannes Harnischfeger, Dr. Eugene Iheanacho, Greg Mbajiorgu, Chika Nwankwo, Chinyelu Ojiako, Felix Ogbalu, Chijioke Onuora and Christian Uzor, for many other good things.

Back in the Netherlands, and also in the United Kingdom, I discussed my project with many people. I would like to thank all those who gave me feedback on my ideas in personal conversations, in the meetings of the Africa Ph.D.-seminar series, and during various seminars and conferences. Several people from various academic disciplines have read earlier versions or sections of this book. I am greatly indebted to them for their critical comments and suggestions. I would also like to acknowledge my students for the enthusiasm with which they discussed my ideas and for their original contributions. My colleagues at the CNWS and at the ISIIS created an atmosphere where working was fun.

Most important of all, I want to thank my mother, my brother, and my friends for friendship, support and inspiration; for long discussions, meals, holidays, visits to the theatre and concerts. In short, for all the things that really matter.

I dedicate this book to Frank Herst, who was at the airport when I returned from Nigeria at six in the morning, and who was there for me on numerous other occasions before and

during the long process of writing this book. Frank's death—at the time when I was revising the first draft of the manuscript—has left an emptiness which will remain. We, his friends, together keep his memory alive, each in his or her own way.

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About the cover

The picture on the front cover is based on a colour photograph of the central meeting house in Nsugbe, printed in Simon Ottenberg, *New Traditions from Nigeria. Seven Artists of the Nsukka Group* (Washington 1997), page 55. The walls were painted with uli motifs in 1993 as the result of a project by the German artist Doris Weller and the Nigerian musician and ethnomusicologist Meki Nzewi, during which they asked women from Nsugbe and nearby Omo to create uli motifs. I have not myself been to Nsugbe, but I have seen uli murals in Nri.

Uli motifs have been described by early anthropologists and colonial officers to the Igbo area, and some drawings and photographs show that these motifs were used in body painting and for murals on shrines at the start of the twentieth century. I do not know how widespread uli painting was at that time, but nowadays wall uli and body uli have largely died out. They have, however, started a new life. In the late 1960s Igbo artists discovered uli motifs and began to use them in their paintings and drawings, where they function as references to Igbo culture and identity. This development has been described by Simon Ottenberg in his beautifully illustrated book. I spoke with a number of these artists when I was in Nigeria.

The turtle on the back cover was lifted from a page the Igbo dictionary *Okowa-Okwu. Igbo-English-English-Igbo Dictionary*, by F. C. Ogbalu (Onitsha n.d.[1962]). Ogbalu was the founder of the Society for Promoting Igbo Language and Culture, and was one of the most well-known champions of Igbo culture. I describe his activities in chapter 8.

Abbreviations

AG	Action Group
B.&F.B.S.	British & Foreign Bible Society
CMS	Church Missionary Society
CO	Colonial Office
IAI	International African Institute
ISU	Ibo State Union
NAE	National Archives of Nigeria, Enugu branch
NAI	National Archives of Nigeria, Ibadan branch
NCNC	National Council of Nigerian Citizens National Council for Nigeria and the Cameroons
N.P.	Northern Provinces
NUT	Nigerian Union of Teachers
PRO	Public Record Office, Kew, London
RHO	Rhodes House, Oxford
S.P.	Southern Provinces
SPAC	Society for Promoting African Culture
SPAH	Society for Promoting African Heritage
SPILC	Society for Promoting Igbo Language and Culture
TUC	Trade Unions Congress of Nigeria
UAC	United Africa Company

A Note on Orthography

As a standard Igbo orthography only emerged in 1962, different spellings of Igbo are used in the sources I consulted. I have not used the standard orthography for the Igbo names and untranslated Igbo terms that I mention in this book, but rather used the spelling that was most commonly used in the sources. For each Igbo term I have used the same spelling throughout the book. There are, however, two exceptions. First, the spelling of book titles—these I left in the spelling in which they were originally published—and second, the matter of the spelling of the term `Igbo'.

For a long time (roughly between 1840 and 1960), `Ibo' rather than `Igbo' was the accepted spelling for both the ethnonym and the language. However, since the 1930s, linguists have been arguing that `Igbo' (*gb* indicating an implosive, non-velarized b) would give a more accurate spelling of the word, and this latter spelling has gradually replaced the older one. While nowadays, the use of `Ibo' is seen as a remnant of colonialism, many Igbo resisted the new spelling during the 1940s and 1950s. It is hence not surprising that the older spelling is found in most of my sources (missionary and colonial as well as Igbo). Therefore, while I use the accepted spelling `Igbo' throughout this work, the older spelling will be found when I quote from older sources and when I use names such as `Ibo State Union' or `Union Ibo'. Also like most Nigerians I met, rather than adding an `s' to indicate plural (English-style), I use `Igbo' for both singular and plural.

Igbo is a tonal language, which means that relative pitch is an essential aspect of the syllables of a word. Linguists have developed rules to indicate tone by using accent signs. However, although an essential aspect of a word, tone is not usually indicated in written or printed Igbo. Following standard practice, I do not indicate tone.