

Promoting Igbo Language and Culture

In previous chapters, I have already mentioned a number of instances of the furthering of Igbo language and culture. Often there was no intention to promote, but—for instance—to protect that which already existed. The general result of the attention paid to Igbo language and culture was a strengthening of the idea of a culture that was typically Igbo and different from that of other groups. This development was to some extent unintentional, as a result of the Igbo interacting in the colonial state with administrators and missionaries, and with other Nigerians. This chapter deals with conscious efforts to promote Igbo language and culture. In a sense, these conscious efforts followed from the earlier debates on Igbo language and culture which have been described in previous chapters.

The important point about these conscious efforts to promote an Igbo identity is that choices were made about what to promote. Thus, even when restricted to language and culture, decisions had to be made about what to promote, and what not to promote. On the one hand, these choices concerned pragmatic considerations; on the other, they were politically motivated. Choosing cultural elements of a certain part of the Igbo area amounted to a political statement. These choices also conferred authority upon certain groups or individuals, especially upon the persons and organizations who were doing the promoting. However, the link between politics and culture is not self-evident. For example, despite the promotion of Igbo language and culture being a political as well as a cultural project, most party politicians who referred to Igbo identity during their campaigns did not actively participate in that promotion. I will discuss below two main areas where Igbo language and culture were promoted: first, the field of education and learning, more specifically the activities of the Society for Promoting Igbo Language and Culture, and second, the cultural activities of the many ethnic unions relating to the Igbo, especially the Ibo State Union.

8.1 The Society for Promoting Igbo Language and Culture (SPILC)

Igbo individuals involved in promoting Igbo culture often explain the need for their activities with references to the threat posed to Igbo culture by colonialism and mission Christianity. In spite of this claim, it would be a mistake to assume that missionaries and Christian converts aimed to overthrow Igbo culture merely to replace it with Christian culture. As I have described in chapter 5, an initially negative view of Igbo society had been replaced with a more positive one which perceived pagan Igbo culture as a precursor to Christianity, rather than as its anti-thesis. Similarly, the colonial government, although not exactly involved in the promotion of Igbo culture, showed an interest in Igbo culture and tried to retain those aspects

of it that could be perceived as acceptable from a European point of view. From 1926 onwards, the British administration tried to create one single Igbo standard language. As I have described in chapter 4, the Igbo did not accept the standard proposed by the administration. This perceived lack of appreciation did not stop the administration from advocating the use of the Igbo language in education as well as other fields. This was a change from the situation which had existed since the turn of the century, whereby the Protestant missionaries were committed to education in the vernacular (although in practice much of it was in English),¹ while Catholic missionaries and the colonial administration generally used English.²

Assuming that Igbo speakers showed no interest in their own language, the officers in the Education Department saw it as their duty to create such an interest.³ I have described the principal methods by which the administration attempted to achieve this in earlier chapters: the administration decided that Igbo had to be used as medium of instruction in primary schools, introduced adult literacy campaigns, and made efforts to create a body of Igbo literature. In 1931, for example, the Education Department organized an 'Ibo Competition' for essays written in Igbo, with prizes provided by the Institute of African Languages and Cultures. Only six entries were received.⁴

The official policy of promoting Igbo was not implemented with great enthusiasm because colonial officers and teachers—Igbo as well as Europeans—tended to hold the English language and culture in higher esteem than Igbo. According to E. N. Emenyonu, who went to school in the colonial era, Igbo language and culture were actually repressed in schools. Teachers cultivated and promoted English, while they punished the use of the vernacular.⁵ The fact that at least one Catholic school fined pupils who spoke Igbo,⁶ illustrates the ambivalence surrounding the colonial efforts to promote the use of Igbo. In chapter 4, I argued that the decision to promote the vernacular was in fact part of the administration's intention to turn the local population into colonial subjects who regarded themselves as members of an African, tribal group and accepted their place within the hierarchy of colonial society. In fact, colonial officers as well as Igbo teachers and parents recognized in the policy of vernacular primary education an attempt to prevent the Igbo masses from becoming successful.⁷ In order to find a clerical position with the government or a foreign company a good command of English was

¹ CMS; G3 A 3/O 1895/6 Letter from Bishop Tugwell, 18 November 1894; G3 A 3/O 1926/7 Minutes of Executive Committee, 3-9 February 1926. APPENDIX (B) Letter from Bishop Lasbrey to Director of Education regarding the use of the Vernacular in Native Education.

² CMS; G3 A 3/O 1910/55 Colony of Southern Nigeria, Education Department, *Code of Regulations for Primary and Secondary Schools (Government and Assisted) Together with Schedules of Instruction, Etc.* (1910).

³ NAE; MINED 13/1/30 R. F. G. Adams to Chief Inspector of Education, 31 August 1945.

⁴ NAE; OGPROF 2/1/353 R. F. G. Adams to Resident, Ogoja Province, 7 March 1931; CSE 1/85/4953 R. F. G. Adams to the Assistant Director of Education, Southern Provinces, 4 March 1933.

⁵ E. N. Emenyonu, *The Rise of the Igbo Novel* (Ibadan 1978) 57.

⁶ Interview E. N. Emenanjo, Aba, 9 December 1995.

⁷ This was of course not voiced in those terms in official documents, which merely stated that the education in elementary schools had to 'familiarise the pupils, throughout their school careers, with other methods of earning a livelihood besides that of sitting on an office stool.' (PRO; CO 583 205/30150 *Annual Report on the Education Department for the year 1934* (Lagos 1935)). To 'prevent the drift of semi-literates to the towns' education had to emphasise the vernacular rather than English, and provide practical rather than academic education (PRO; CO 583 258/30150 Letter B. H. Bourdillon to Viscount Cranborne, 19 November 1942; See also: CO 583 284/30151/8 *Memorandum on Educational Policy in Nigeria* (Lagos 1947) 3, 16-17).

necessary, and this could only be acquired at the few secondary schools in the area, where all instruction was in English. To many Igbo, therefore, it was the use of the vernacular in the primary schools that was perceived as being repressive, not the English medium of secondary education. While parents appealed to the government and missionaries to provide primary education in English,⁸ secondary school teachers saw the need to balance the great emphasis placed upon English language and knowledge with an appreciation for at least some aspects of Igbo culture. Although Igbo was not used as a means of instruction, it was taught as a language next to English and Latin. Furthermore, Igbo dances and literary activities in Igbo were encouraged, and the knowledge of Igbo proverbs was the subject of school competitions.⁹ It was in the context of colonial education that the first Igbo cultural societies, and later the Society for Promoting Igbo Language and Culture, emerged.

The founding of the Society for Promoting Igbo Language and Culture

In 1940, the science master of the Dennis Memorial Grammar School in Onitsha, Nathaniel Ohiaeri, with the support of the school authorities founded a school club with the name Society for Promoting African Culture (SPAC).¹⁰ In 1945 the Chief Inspector of Education noted that this 'Ibo Culture Society' met regularly to discuss Igbo history and culture, while keeping records of its activities in English.¹¹ Indeed, the study of the Igbo language was not SPAC's main concern; the Society met every Tuesday to discuss Igbo culture and collect proverbs. It also awarded a prize for Igbo Culture which was donated by the school principal.¹² For several consecutive years during the early 1940s this prize was won by F. Chidozie Ogbalu (1927-1990), who was a student at the school between 1941 and 1944. Ogbalu claimed that his interest in Igbo proverbs had been awakened by the head master of his primary school—whom he described as 'a great spinner of proverbs'—and that by the time he came to Dennis Memorial Grammar School it was only natural for him to become a member of Ohiaeri's SPAC.¹³ Upon finishing the school in Onitsha, Ogbalu went to the CMS Teacher Training College in Awka for two years. In Awka he founded a Society for Promoting African Culture which he ran in

⁸ F. K. Ekechi, *Tradition and Transformation in Eastern Nigeria. A Sociopolitical History of Owerri and its Hinterland 1902-1947* (Kent, OH 1989) 104; I wrote about this in chapter 4.

⁹ E. N. Emenanjo, 'The Ogbalu factor in Igbo literary history: an overview' in: Rems Nna Umeasiegbu, ed., *The Study of Igbo Culture. Essays in Honour of F. C. Ogbalu* (Enugu 1988) 33-50; there 35, 38. See also: CMS; G3 A 3/O 1910/84 Ibo Reading Prizes. Efforts of schools to collect and discuss Igbo oral literature with their pupils were mentioned in: NAE; RIVPROF 8/15/153 Report for the period ending March 31st 1927. By H. F. Mathews, Anthropological Officer, S.P., Owerri, 31 March 1927.

¹⁰ F. C. Ogbalu, 'My early part in promoting Igbo language', appendix to: A. E. Afigbo, ed., *F. C. Ogbalu and the Igbo Language* (Onitsha 1995) 263-268; there 263. Ohiaeri was later involved in the making of the *Primer on Ibo Etiquette* which I have discussed in chapter 6.

¹¹ CMS; G3 A3 e 5 Report on Dennis Memorial Grammar, Onitsha, by S. Milburn, Chief Inspector of Education. Dates of inspection 21-23 May 1945. The records of the Society for Promoting African Culture, as well as those of the Society for Promoting Igbo Language and Culture were lost during the Civil War.

¹² F. C. Ogbalu, Reminiscences of St. Augustine's Grammar School, Nkwerre (Text of after-dinner speech delivered as guest of honour of the S.A.G.S. Old Boys Association, 8 December 1978). Included in Ogbalu's private papers, file marked 'd'; also: Ogbalu, 'My early part in promoting Igbo language' 263.

line with Ohiaeri's SPAC in Onitsha. In 1948, upon his return to Dennis Memorial Grammar School in 1948 to teach Latin, history and geography, Ogbalu took over the lead of SPAC from Ohiaeri, who had left for further studies.

During the 1940s there was still great controversy over the choice of a standard Igbo dialect and official orthography. As Ogbalu was educated in Anglican mission schools and was employed as a teacher by the CMS, it is perhaps not surprising that in the debate he took sides with the Anglican missionaries against the government's proposals. Ogbalu did what many other Igbo working with Government or mission had done before him: he expressed his opinion in a newspaper article. In this article, Ogbalu not only explained why he considered the orthography proposed by the Government to be wrong, he also expressed doubts about the intentions of the British administration. This is not surprising as the late 1940s were a period of protest against British rule, led by the NCNC and its leader Azikiwe. Ogbalu was not merely a defender of Igbo language and culture against the influence of English, he was also an NCNC supporter and an advocate of Nigerian independence from Britain. Ogbalu's opinion was published in the *Nigerian Spokesman*, an Onitsha-based nationalist newspaper owned by Azikiwe. In the article, using the confrontational, aggressive language that was common among nationalists, he accused the British of sponsoring the new orthography to 'kill' the Igbo language and safeguard the supremacy of English. Ogbalu's superiors at Dennis Memorial Grammar School were not amused. Both the Rev. P. J. Ross and school principal Clark expressed their annoyance at the article, arguing that what Ogbalu should have done was write and publish books in Igbo in the orthography he favoured rather than write a controversial newspaper article in English that was riddled with 'unpardonable howlers'.¹⁴

In 1949 Ogbalu was transferred to Nkwerre where he followed the by now familiar pattern and founded a school club promoting African heritage (SPAH) whose activities included cultural dances, debates, and excursions to the villages around Nkwerre for lectures from elders.¹⁵ Ogbalu also started a similar society called the Society for Promoting Igbo Language and Culture (SPILC) for which he composed the anthem 'God bless Igbo language' (*Chuku Gozie Asusu Igbo*) to be sung during the meetings of the Society.¹⁶ The difference between the two organizations was that while SPAH was a school society whose membership was limited to students and staff, the membership of the SPILC was public and open to all who wanted to join. Ogbalu later remembered that he founded the Society 'to fight the New Orthography and to make people like to study Igbo and produce books in it'.¹⁷ That same year Ogbalu published his first two pamphlets in Igbo: *Mungo Park* and *Igbo Oru*. Meanwhile he continued to oppose the orthography proposed by the Government in newspaper articles which he signed as secretary of the SPILC. However, for months Ogbalu remained the only member of his own society.

¹³ Ogbalu, 'My early part in promoting Igbo language' 263.

¹⁴ Ogbalu, 'My early part in promoting Igbo language' 264-265; see also Emenanjo, 'The Ogbalu factor in Igbo literary history' 38.

¹⁵ Ogbalu, *Reminiscences of St. Augustine's Grammar School, Nkwerre*.

¹⁶ 'Abu ndi otu iwelite omenala na asusu Igbo', appendix I to: Mazi F. C. Ogbalu Funeral Committee, *The Passing of a Legend. Chief (Dr) Frederick Chidozie Ogbalu* (n.p.[Onitsha] 1990) 40.

¹⁷ Ogbalu, 'My early part in promoting Igbo language' 265.

The formation of cultural societies had been a feature of Nigerian social and cultural life for some time. Already in 1914, a Yoruba society Egbe Agba O'Tan existed which had as its aim 'to institute researches into all Yoruba Religions, Customs, Physiology, Medical Knowledge, Arts, Sciences, Manufactures, Poetical Cultures, Political and National Histories &c.'¹⁸ Other cultural societies also existed. The Yoruba society Egbe Omo Oduduwa in particular was quite well known among Igbo newspaper readers because of the hostility with which Azikiwe had greeted its founding in 1946.¹⁹ It is therefore not surprising that D. C. Erinne, too, founded a Society for Promoting Igbo Language and Culture (SPILC) in Onitsha in 1949, simultaneous to the start of Ogbalu's SPILC in Nkwerre. The two societies merged the next year into a SPILC with Erinne as its first president and Ogbalu as its secretary.²⁰ The aims of the Society, laid down in its Constitution, included the bringing into contact with one another of all those who took an interest in Igbo language and culture. The Society wanted to preserve the purity of the Igbo language, 'not by foolish interference with its living development' (a reference to the efforts of the colonial administration to introduce a new orthography and standard dialect), but by producing Igbo text books and vernacular literature for adults as well as boys.²¹ It also advocated the use of every available scientific method to study the history of the Igbo and to use the results to make the Igbo people proud of their shared past. As well as these aims, the Society intended to study Igbo culture, institutions, laws and customs in order to establish which aspects were good and to promote these by organizing festivals and prize contests, and by establishing an Igbo national museum.²²

The Igbo identity assumed in SPILC's constitution was largely based on a Western perception of the Igbo: it showed a strong awareness of language as the connecting element of the Igbo people, and emphasized those aspects of culture that had been described in the colonial and mission Christianity's debates. The research method proposed was the Western-style academic approach, and the means suggested to spread Igbo consciousness were equally Western: education, books, prizes and a museum.

The emergence of SPILC and the Society's aims—linked to Ogbalu's personal involvement—illustrate the diverse and seemingly contradictory roots of efforts to promote Igbo identity in general. On the one hand, the Society's resistance to the language proposals of the colonial administration, the anti-British rhetoric, and Ogbalu's personal involvement with the NCNC, clearly show the Society's roots in the anti-colonial movement. In this context the Society presents 'authentic' Igbo culture as a challenge to the colonial project in general and those aspects of it relating to Igbo language in particular. On the other hand, however, SPILC very clearly remains within the material and intellectual framework provided by missions and colonialism. Not only was the establishment of cultural societies encouraged by the CMS, but

¹⁸ 'Constitution of the Egbe Agba O'Tan', Appendix VI to M. R. Doortmont, *Recapturing the Past. Samuel Johnson and the Construction of the History of the Yoruba* (Rotterdam 1994) 160-164; there 160.

¹⁹ Richard L. Sklar, *Nigerian Political Parties* (Princeton 1963; New York and Enugu 1983) 69-70.

²⁰ Emenanjo, 'The Ogbalu factor in Igbo literary history' 38.

²¹ This explicit reference to boys in the SPILC constitution probably reflects the fact that in those days in Nigeria the secondary school environment was predominantly male. Of course the intellectual discussion about Igbo language and culture had from its very start been dominated by educated Igbo and European males (with the exceptions of Ida Ward and Margaret Green).

²² Ogbalu's private papers, file marked 'f. *The Constitution. Society for Promoting Igbo Language and Culture.*

also the definitions of Igbo language and culture that were employed reflected the missionary and colonial perspectives. Furthermore, most of the Society's activities were a continuation of earlier activities by the missions and the colonial Education Department.

The officers of the Society, to judge by the Constitution, had clearly well thought-out aims and intentions. However, the Constitution did not specify how the Society should actually function to achieve these aims. Some ideas on this were provided in a six-page pamphlet from the 1950s, titled simply *Society for Promoting Ibo Language & Culture Nigeria*.²³ In a section on the 'detailed method of working' it was suggested that the Igbo language should be studied in the same way as other modern languages in order to facilitate publishing in the language. According to the pamphlet, 'Members write books and pamphlets on all aspects of the life of the Ibos.' Also, members of SPILC were encouraged to hold discussions and debates on various subjects such as Igbo institutions, Igbo philosophy of life, social and political organizations, custom and music. The latter would be further illustrated by dramatic shows and concerts. The members had to spread propaganda literature in order to arouse interest in the Igbo language and culture, to convince people of 'the subtle delicacy and wealth of our mother tongue', and to persuade them to join the Society. Finally, it was suggested that: 'Cultural excursions and expeditions could be undertaken say during the holidays or vacations in case of students and school children and teachers to places of interest to observe our people as they are.' Being an experienced school teacher, Ogbalu suggested that 'The first week of the first term is very suitable generally.'²⁴

From what can be reconstructed about the functioning of SPILC it follows that the suggested method—or its implementation—was insufficient to achieve the Society's aims. Indeed, despite its national claims, for years SPILC remained very much a school-affair. The first members of SPILC were pupils of Ogbalu, usually 12 or 13 years old. Whenever SPILC met, which was once a week, the pupils had to wear a wrapper on top of their short-trousered school uniform. Apart from this cloth—thrown over their chest and tied around the back—they held a staff in their hand and spoke Igbo rather than English.²⁵ These young members had to write short stories and plays, as well as collect Igbo proverbs, the best of which received small prizes provided by Ogbalu. He also organized excursions to Igbo villages. At Umuariam in Obowo, the SPILC pupils stayed at the local primary school, where they took turns to cook and serve Igbo food, while others were engaged in games. They all went out together to explore the village, to interview the elders, and to watch any local festival going on.²⁶

SPILC's excursions to Igbo villages reflect Ogbalu's understanding that proper Igbo

²³ The anonymous pamphlet (no doubt written by Ogbalu) is simply titled *Society for Promoting Ibo Language & Culture Nigeria*. It must derive from the period before 1957, as it dates from Ogbalu's time in Nkwere (he went to Diobu in 1958) and was not printed at Ogbalu's own press (he established Varsity Press in 1957).

²⁴ Anonymous pamphlet *Society for Promoting Ibo Language & Culture Nigeria* 4-5.

²⁵ Interview with Mr B. I. N. Osuagwu, Owerri 5 December 1995. Osuagwu was one of the first members of SPILC and a pupil of Ogbalu at St. Augustine's. He remained active in SPILC and became a teacher himself. As a promoter of the Igbo language he was mainly active after the Biafra War, in 1974 he started the first department of Igbo Language (at Alvan Ikoku College in Owerri).

²⁶ B. I. N. Osuagwu, 'F. C. Ogbalu: the man and the teacher' in: A. E. Afigbo, ed., *F. C. Ogbalu and the Igbo Language* (Onitsha 1995) 52-67; there 58.

culture is found in the village-setting. In this respect, Ogbalu was not so much setting the trend, as accepting a by then commonly held notion which linked modernity and 'Europeanism' to the city, and tradition, authenticity and Igbo-ness to the village. As I have described in previous chapters, this notion was shared by the colonial administration and mission Christianity, as well as by educated Igbo individuals. As Ogbalu and the other officers of SPILC were mission-educated school teachers, it is not surprising that the Society shared many of the views emerging from the colonial and mission Christianity's debates. SPILC nevertheless managed to turn these ideas into a distinctly Igbo project to unify the Igbo speakers around an Igbo culture, and to do so without interference from what they regarded as European outsiders.

I have already indicated above that SPILC considered writing books and publishing to be among its main activities. This aspect deserves more attention. Already at the very start of SPILC, Ogbalu made use of the school boys who were SPILC members to distribute his writings. In the early 1950s, Ogbalu published *Ilu-Igbo Banyere Madu*, a pamphlet of Igbo proverbs he had collected, consisting of one page in English about the aims of SPILC, two maps with very generous claims about the size of the Igbo area, and twenty pages of proverbs in Igbo.²⁷ The cover shows an open book radiating beams of light, representing the enlightenment brought by books and education, an image which of course reflects the missionary view on Christianity and education.²⁸ *Ilu-Igbo* was one of the booklets that Bertram Osuagwu and the other SPILC school boys sold from one staff house to the other and among students, receiving a small cut from the proceeds.²⁹

This emphasis on pamphlets was not unique to SPILC. Rather, Ogbalu participated in a more general tendency to produce inexpensive booklets, of which the Onitsha market literature (described in chapter 7) was another manifestation. The form and contents of these pamphlets were influenced by the booklets produced by the missions and the colonial administration for schools and adult education, and indeed similar pamphlets were produced and read among other southern Nigerian groups such as the Yoruba. SPILC did not set the trend, but the way in which the medium of pamphlet literature was used to promote language and culture is relevant for the present discussion.

In principle, all SPILC members were encouraged to write books and pamphlets on subjects relating to Igbo culture. The authors could then offer it to SPILC for publication, or make their own arrangements to print and sell their works, using the imprint 'Published by the Society for Promoting Ibo Language & Culture, Nigeria'. A fee had to be paid to the Society for the use of the imprint, because 'the appendage helps the work to sell' and also because the Society intended to collectively advertise all the works published by its members.³⁰ In practice, however, nearly all the books that were published under the banner of SPILC were written by Ogbalu, or were volumes edited by Ogbalu containing prize-winning essays that had been submitted to competitions organized by SPILC.³¹ The publications broadly fell into three

²⁷ Anonymous [F. C. Ogbalu], *Ilu-Igbo Banyere Madu* (Nkwerre, n.d. [c.1952]).

²⁸ Compare J. D. Y. Peel, 'The cultural work of Yoruba ethnogenesis' in: E. Tonkin, M. Chapman and M. MacDonald, eds., *History and Ethnicity* (London 1989).

²⁹ Osuagwu, 'F. C. Ogbalu: the man and the teacher' 58; interview Osuagwu, 5 December 1995.

³⁰ *Society for Promoting Ibo Language & Culture Nigeria* 5-6.

³¹ '£60 marked for Igbo story contest', *West African Pilot* 9 September 1954.

categories. First, there were the collections of Igbo proverbs and stories written in Igbo. Usually, no explanations were offered of the meaning of the proverbs and stories included in these volumes.

A second group was formed of books written in Igbo discussing matters of general interest. These included Ogbalu's English-Igbo dictionary which at the same time claimed to be a first attempt at compiling an Igbo dictionary (to be improved upon later on)³² and a solid foundation for the study of Igbo. It further illustrates the two ways in which Ogbalu and SPILC attempted to use the Igbo language for matters introduced by the British and hitherto referred to in English: either by 'Igbonizing' the English word (for example: *pegani* - 'pagan' and *jirikoloji* 'gynaecology') or by combining two existing Igbo words to create a new one (as in *ugbo-ufo* - 'airplane', combining the Igbo words for 'boat' and 'air').³³ Other publications that fall into this category include an early volume on the slave trade which was reprinted several times, a concise history of Nigeria, as well as books about 'good people' (*Ndi-oma: 1. Samuel Crowther. 2. Mary Slessor. 3. Florence Nightingale*) or about the 'saviours of Africa' (*Ndi nzoputa Africa. Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe. Dr. Kwame Nkruma*).³⁴

Last but not least, there were the pamphlets addressing matters of language policy. These pamphlets were written in English and argued against the Government's efforts to introduce a new orthography for Igbo, which Ogbalu preferred to call the 'Adams-Ward orthography' to stress that the proposals amounted in fact to a foreign intervention. Around 1952 Ogbalu published *An Investigation into the New Ibo Orthography*, co-authored with D. C. Erinne, which assessed the advantages and disadvantages of both the old and the new orthography. The pamphlet was in fact propaganda for the old orthography, which in the book was also called the 'universal orthography'. Ogbalu was clearly aware of the influence that naming could have upon the perception of reality, and by extension upon reality itself. This can also be seen from the name of a pamphlet he published in 1955, in the midst of the language controversy, titled rather prematurely, *Teach Yourself the All-Accepted Igbo Orthography*.

³² Ogbalu's dictionary was not the first. Already in 1904, Ganot's *Dictionary* was published by the Catholic mission.

³³ F. C. Ogbalu, *Okowa-Okwu. Igbo-English-English-Igbo Dictionary* (Onitsha n.d.[1962]); P. N. Anagbogu, 'F. C. Ogbalu and Igbo lexicon' in: A. E. Afigbo, ed., *F. C. Ogbalu and the Igbo Language* (Onitsha 1995) 181-185.

³⁴ Anonymous, *Igba-Oru na Otu Esi Kwusi Ya (Slave Trade and its Abolition)* (Nkwerre, Orlu c.1955); F. C. Ogbalu, *Akuko Nigeria. (Abridged History of Nigeria) Based on the Vowel Harmony System of Spelling in the Revised Igbo Alphabet* (Nkwerre, Orlu 1955); anonymous, *Ndi-oma: 1. Samuel Crowther. 2. Mary Slessor. 3. Florence Nightingale* Igbo Mass Education Series no. 2 (Nkwerre, Orlu 1952); F. C. Ogbalu, *Ndi Nzoputa Africa. Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe. Dr. Kwame Nkruma* (Onitsha 1956).

These pamphlets on orthography present just one aspect of SPILC's role as a pressure group against the Government's language policy; Ogbalu also continued to send articles to the newspapers on behalf of SPILC, toured from school to school to give lectures about the matter, and wrote to the Ministry of Education.³⁵ The orthography debate furthermore shows the extent to which the activities of SPILC resulted from the opinions and interests of its founder Ogbalu. Ogbalu remained the central figure of SPILC until his death in 1990, and it has often been argued that SPILC was in fact synonymous with Ogbalu.³⁶ However, people other than Ogbalu were involved in SPILC, too, especially since the Civil War when Ogbalu managed to attract a circle of Igbo intellectuals, but also during the pre-war period. The orthography question resulted in a crisis in the Society following the recommendations from a commission set up by the Eastern Regional Government to formulate a standard orthography during the 1950s. Ogbalu and Erinne were members of this commission as SPILC representatives. When they were out-voted by the other members and could not accept the conclusions, SPILC distanced itself from the commission's proposals. While the Government and the Methodist mission published in the commission's recommended orthography, Ogbalu changed tactics, and began to publish in a modification of the proposed orthography rather than in the old mission orthography he had hitherto used. Many members of SPILC did not agree with Ogbalu's decision and a special SPILC meeting was held in Owerri to solve the matter. Nearly all the members, led by chairman Erinne, preferred to stick to the old orthography and destroy those publications that Ogbalu had already published in his own version. Although Ogbalu initially refused to accept the decision of the SPILC members, he finally gave in during a second meeting on the subject.³⁷

Apart from the actions against Government language policy, the many publications and the school activities and excursions, the Society did not organize many activities. The academic seminars, the forums for educators teaching in Igbo, and the workshops to develop Igbo textbooks for schools that were organized by SPILC in the years after the Civil War, were not initiated in the pre-war period. When Ogbalu and Erinne created SPILC they envisaged a structure comprising one strong central society with the SPILC secretariat, and many associated branch societies. The central society was dominated by Ogbalu, and proved to be the part of SPILC that received most publicity. However, an unknown number of branch societies existed, mainly operating in schools and organizing activities such as prize competitions and excursions on a local level. In principle, SPILC organized annual meetings to discuss financial and general reports, and make decisions about future policy. However, during the pre-war period the annual meeting was usually not convened. The 1963 meeting was held, but attendance was so poor that it did not reach the quorum of thirty members. More successful meetings were held in 1964 and 1965, the latter especially was considered a success, with 85

³⁵ NAE; MINED 13/1/31 F. C. Ogbalu to Chief Inspector of Education, Nkwere, 31 January 1951; OGPROF 2/1/2509 Minutes of the Ibo State Assembly in Port Harcourt, 17-18 December 1955.

³⁶ Emenanjo, 'The Ogbalu factor in Igbo literary history' 35; Interviews with: Igwe Obi, Enugu, 16 November 1995; A. E. Afigbo, Nsukka, 19 November 1995; B. I. N. Osuagwu; Owerri, 30 November 1995; E. N. Emenanjo, Ibusa, 30 December 1995.

³⁷ Ogbalu, 'My early part in promoting Igbo language' 267-268.

members present from different parts of the Igbo area.³⁸

The impact of SPILC

The extent of SPILC's influence during the pre-Biafra period is difficult to establish. The Society strove for official Government recognition (and subventions) but, failing to achieve this, remained a grassroots affair.³⁹ While insiders to SPILC often make exaggerated claims as to the success of the Society, many outsiders maintain that SPILC, certainly in the pre-war years, hardly made any impact.⁴⁰ However, there are at least four reasons to assume that SPILC made an impact upon the general public's perception of Igbo culture. First, a considerable number of Igbo were aware of the Society's existence, either through the several branch Societies which were mainly established at schools, or through the publication of its activities in the local newspapers. The Society paid for advertisements to announce meetings and promote SPILC publications.⁴¹ It also received a lot of free publicity through newspaper articles reporting on the Society's meetings, reports of donations being made to the Society, and letters to the editor representing the Society's position on matters of language and culture. At times the newspapers actively promoted SPILC. In the early 1950s the *Eastern Nigerian Guardian* wrote that 'The S.P.I.L.C. deserves universal support', and the *Nigerian Spokesman* argued that 'Every Ibo man must be grateful to the Society for Promoting Igbo Language' and also that 'every Ibo man has got to support the society' in order to preserve the purity of the Igbo language.⁴²

Secondly, there was the existence of a number of SPILC publications on various Igbo-related topics, which I have described above. Unfortunately, any assessment of the impact that these publications might have had on the wider Igbo society is hard to make in the absence of circulation figures. Sales must have been substantial enough to allow Ogbalu to start his own printing business in 1957, the Varsity Press in Onitsha, which continued to publish and gradually expanded until the Civil War. The general popularity of Onitsha market literature during this period provides some indication of the interest which existed for books and reading, also on Igbo-related topics. Indeed, a number of SPILC pamphlets were reprinted several times. Furthermore, SPILC publications were used in schools in the Igbo area, as can be deduced from Obieze Ogbu's opinion that 'Some of the books they have written are bad by all measurements, and it is shocking that some of them are inflicted on our children as compulsory

³⁸ S. U. Oruchalu, 'The Society for Promoting Igbo Language and Culture: a history' in: A. E. Afigbo, ed., *F. C. Ogbalu and the Igbo Language* (Onitsha 1995) 108-130; there 117.

³⁹ 'Igbo literature', *Eastern Outlook and Cameroons Star* 21 October 1954. It was only in 1973, when the new states created after the Biafra War began to develop culture policies, that SPILC received a government subvention (interview with G. M. K. Anoka, former East Central State Director of Culture, Owerri 6 December 1995).

⁴⁰ Interviews A. E. Afigbo, Nsukka, 19 November 1995; Igwe Obi, Enugu 16 November 1995. Many people I spoke to insisted that they had never heard of SPILC.

⁴¹ *Eastern Outlook and Cameroons Star* 24 June 1954: 'FOR IGBO BOOKS, TUITION: Consult Igbo Language Society with stamp. Secretary, S.P.I.L.C., Nkwerre, Orlu'.

⁴² *Eastern Nigerian Guardian* 29 March 1951; *Nigerian Spokesman* 2 August 1952. See also 'Igbo literature', *Eastern Outlook and Cameroons Star* 21 October 1954.

reading in some colleges.⁴³

This leads to the third sign of success for SPILC, namely the fact that many of the Society's active members, including the founders, were employed as teachers.⁴⁴ As a result, a relatively large and significant group of young people, including many who were later to become prominent Igbo academics, were introduced to the aims of SPILC, as well as to the characteristics of Igbo language and culture according to SPILC.

Finally, the Society's impact can be seen in the fact that Ogbalu was at least partially successful in the orthography question: in the end the Government gave up trying to introduce the new orthography as a standard, and rather had a new orthography decided upon by a new commission, led by the then vice-president of SPILC, Dr S. E. Onwu. The Onwu Commission's 1961 recommendations, which were acceptable to Ogbalu, finally solved the orthography question.

Despite SPILC's success in the four areas just mentioned, it failed to achieve many of its aims. Two related problems explain this failure: the low number of members of the Society and lack of funds. The basic problem was the relative lack of interest among the population, resulting in a low membership. According to a former secretary of SPILC, this was the case because individuals perceived no immediate material benefits to be derived from being a member.⁴⁵ What, then, were the privileges granted to members? According to a 1950s pamphlet, members had two privileges. The first was that 'Members derived great satisfaction in the feeling that they are making their humble contributions towards the elevation of our fatherland.' The other privilege was a 25 percent discount on SPILC publications and the possibility of acting as agents for the Society, selling its publications.⁴⁶ Membership indeed offered no real material benefits, but this does not fully explain the low number of members. Another explanation is that during the 1950s and 1960s, many unions, clubs and political organizations existed, all looking for support from the general public. Although SPILC was the only Igbo organization focusing exclusively on language and culture, it did not make sufficiently clear how it was different from the other groups. During the first decades of its existence, SPILC publicity was about the orthography question. However, as I have described in chapter 4, many other organizations including Church bodies, town unions and the Ibo State Union, all voiced their opinion on the matter. The result of SPILC's clear support for the

⁴³ Obieze Ogbo, 'Saving the Igbo language', *Uwa ndi Igbo. Journal of Igbo Life and Culture* 1.1 (1984) 103.

⁴⁴ For example, more than half of the early officers and members of SPILC worked at schools. Connected to St. Augustine's, Nkwere, were H. O. Chiwuzie and of course Ogbalu himself; with Dennis Memorial Grammar School, Onitsha, were J. Onwuka, A. E. Mgbemena and Erinne; from St. Marks's College, Awka, came S. O. Ogoazi and S. I. Okediadi, while D. E. Ogbogu came from St. Paul's College in the same town. E. N. Nebedum was senior headmaster at Udo Group School, Owerri; S. Okezie was senior headmaster at Central School Ihiala; R. C. Mogo was senior tutor at Okrika Grammar School; and M. O. Onwuamegbu was principal of IHEME College, Ndizuogu.

⁴⁵ Oruchalu, 'The Society for Promoting Igbo Language and Culture' 126.

⁴⁶ *Society for Promoting Ibo Language & Culture Nigeria* 6. When SPILC was re-established after the Biafra War, a number of incentives were added to make membership more interesting. The new privileges to members included death benefits of 1,000 Naira to the next-of-kin on the demise of a member, and 500 Naira to a member on the death of a member's mother, father, husband or wife. There were also plans, which were never implemented, to offer loans to members, and to allow members to use the letters MSPILC, FSPILC, and AMSPILC after their names (depending on whether they were a member, a fellow, or an associate member of the society). See: Oruchalu, 'The Society for Promoting Igbo Language and Culture' 117.

position taken by the Anglican mission was of course that it alienated those Igbo who were interested in matters of language and culture, but had a different opinion. Furthermore, unlike the other organizations, SPILC aimed at a Western educated public, thereby excluding the majority of the Igbo population. Although, like SPILC, the different town unions were usually led by members of the educated elite, their meetings welcomed all, educated or not, and the benefits of development schemes and mutual assistance funds organized by the unions were generally understood.

From the relative lack of interest followed a second problem: lack of funds. As the membership fee was low and the number of members limited, most of the money needed for the functioning of the Society came from the proceeds of book sales and from Ogbalu's own pocket. Although SPILC occasionally received considerable donations, which were widely publicised,⁴⁷ on the whole the functioning of SPILC was hampered by financial constraints, and most of the projects initiated by the Society could not function as a result.⁴⁸

Language, culture and politics

The pre-Civil War history of SPILC is relevant for two reasons. So far, I have shown that efforts were made from the 1940s to promote Igbo language and culture, and that these ideas reached a considerable audience of mainly school children and educated Igbo working in the 'modern' (Westernized) sector of colonial society. The other argument for the relevance of SPILC's history is that it shows the extent to which culture, politics and identity are interrelated, on both the intellectual and organizational levels, in the developing of Igbo nationalism.

To start with the intellectual content, SPILC's concern with the Igbo language and its definition of Igbo culture largely followed from the intellectual debate on education and language that had been initiated by missions and colonial administration. This can be seen in matters such as the importance attached to the written language, to proverbs, and to the village as the location of proper Igbo culture. Furthermore, the orthography controversy with its bitter disputes between representatives from the missions and the Education Department, took most of SPILC's energy during the first decade of its existence, with SPILC taking sides with the Anglican mission against the Government. SPILC's concerns were, however, also influenced by the rhetoric of the emerging nationalist movement demanding independence for Nigeria. From this perspective, SPILC argued that it was the Igbo—and the Igbo only!—who could take decisions about their own, national language. Ogbalu also argued that despite the misgivings one might have about certain aspects of Igbo traditional religion from the perspective of Christianity, Igbo culture as a whole needed to be accepted as the Igbo people's shared heritage, on a par with those of other peoples such as the Yoruba or the British. In accordance with the NCNC's 'Freedom Charter', which had argued for a Nigerian federation consisting of the different ethnic groups organized as states, SPILC claimed that the Igbo were a nation,

⁴⁷ In July 1954, Ogbalu on behalf of SPILC accepted a donation of £10 10s from the Onitsha Southern District Council. 'Donation to Ibo Society', *Eastern Outlook and Cameroons Star* 29 July 1954.

⁴⁸ Oruchalu, 'The Society for Promoting Igbo Language and Culture' 127.

sharing one common Igbo culture. Of course, the question about the actual content of that culture remained to be solved. However, it appears as if, at least until the Civil War, SPILC did not really attempt to decide what was Igbo culture. On the one hand, the Society's leadership spent most of its time on the matters of orthography and dialect, while, on the other, it seems that efforts to define Igbo culture were perceived as potentially divisive. The 'culture' side of the Society was mainly expressed through 'safe' subjects such as collections of proverbs and stories, and excursions to Igbo villages. Another persistent problem was speculation about the location of the centre of the Igbo area. While mission Christianity's and the colonial debates had been trying to pinpoint the centre, the SPILC debate was careful not to take a position in these matters. Of course this made political sense in view of the increasing scale of political mobilization, which had not only resulted in the definition of 'Igbo' as both a social and cultural unit as well as a potential focus of political mobilization, but now also initiated a struggle for power and influence among Igbo individuals and groups from different regions in the Igbo area.⁴⁹ As it was, SPILC was already regarded as representing the view that the Onitsha-Awka axis was the centre of the Igbo area, rather than Ngwa or Arochuku. Of course Ogbalu himself had been born in Abagana, a town in between Awka and Onitsha.

As an organization, SPILC had close links to party politics in the sense that a number of its officers were also active in the NCNC or the Ibo State Union, or both. For example, the secretary of the Ibo State Union, P. O. Nsugbe, was also a member of the SPILC executive. The actions of B. O. N. Eluwa in his position as Permanent Under-Secretary of the Ibo State Union will be described below. Here, we meet him as the Vice-President of SPILC during the 1950s. I have already mentioned that Ogbalu himself was involved in the nationalist movement and supported the NCNC. Ogbalu supported Azikiwe and the NCNC in his publications, which included *Dr. Zik of Africa*, a 123-page book in English, a slimmer volume *Dr. Zik's Evolution of Federal Government in Nigeria*,⁵⁰ and the above-mentioned Igbo-language pamphlet *Ndi Nzoputa Africa* ('saviours of Africa'). He was also politically active in that party. In 1959 he contested and won a seat in the Federal House of Representatives as the NCNC candidate for Awka North. From what is known of Ogbalu's activities as a Member of Parliament it becomes clear that he achieved a number of improvements for the Awka area (his constituency), including a police van, new police stations, new roads, the introduction of electricity in Awka, and the opening of a post office in his home town Abagana. He was, however, less active in using his seat to try and further Igbo language and culture.⁵¹ This seems hard to explain, as Ogbalu had always been, and continued to be, so committed to SPILC and the promoting of Igbo language and culture. Part of the explanation for this behaviour may be that the NCNC had already been under attack for being an Igbo party, and that Ogbalu thought

⁴⁹ V. C. I. Anene, An aspect of Igbo history presented to the first international seminar of the Society for Promoting Igbo Language and Culture at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka on August 28 - September 1st 1982 (unpublished paper 1982).

⁵⁰ F. C. Ogbalu, *Dr. Zik of Africa. Biography and Speeches* (n.p.[Onitsha] n.d.[1957]); F. C. Ogbalu, *Dr. Zik's Evolution of Federal Government in Nigeria* (n.p. [Onitsha] n.d.).

⁵¹ Mazi F. C. Ogbalu Funeral Committee, *The Passing of a Legend*, page 22, refers to two of Ogbalu's own publications for more information: *Selected Speeches by F. C. Ogbalu* and *My Achievements in Parliament*. I have been unable to trace these books.

it wiser not to stress Igbo interests. However, this was something that other NCNC politicians openly continued to do,⁵² and I cannot explain why Ogbalu would be different. It is more likely that Ogbalu himself differentiated between his work for SPILC and his function as Member of Parliament for his constituency which as a matter of course related to more local matters. Therefore, my interpretation would be, first, that Ogbalu's personal political development from anti-colonial nationalism to the defense of local interests reflects the general development of Nigerian party politics as described in chapter 3, and, second, that Ogbalu perceived his activities aimed at promoting Igbo language and culture as non-political. Nevertheless, SPILC as an organization tried to influence language policy decisions. Indeed, the Society was as much a political pressure group as it was a club of people interested in their culture. In defining its interest as Igbo language and culture, SPILC was among the first organizations to select the Igbo group as their unit of operation.

⁵² Larry Diamond, *Class, Ethnicity and Democracy in Nigeria. The Failure of the First Republic* (Syracuse 1988); C. Offodile, *Dr. M. I. Okpara. A Biography* (Enugu 1980).

8.2 The Ibo State Union and other Igbo unions

In earlier chapters I have already mentioned the existence of a great number Igbo unions, organized on the different levels of town, district and province, following the units of the colonial administration. Individuals could be involved with several unions at the same time. For example, F. C. Ogbalu was not only active in SPILC and NCNC, he was also member of several unions, including the Abagana Youths Association (which he founded), the Abagana Welfare Union (of which he became the National Secretary), and the Adagbe Development Union (of which he was the Chairman).⁵³ The primary aims of the unions were not cultural, but social and political, together resulting in the production of distinct, urban localities.⁵⁴ In the cities, where most unions originated, the social aims were to help new arrivals to adjust to the life in town, to provide funds in case of death or illness of members, to establish educational facilities, and to make grants available to promising youths. Furthermore, they maintained the contacts between the urban dwellers and their places of origin. In the urban context where different migrant groups were represented, ethnic associations could gain importance in local urban politics. Indeed, the claims to power of the founders seem to have constituted the main reason for the establishing of many Igbo Unions. For example, shortly after the inauguration of the Ibo Union, Ibadan, the Union's secretary wrote to the colonial administration, asking them to 'kindly refer any matter, social, political or otherwise, which affects the Ibos as a whole, or a section of the Ibos resident in Ibadan, to this Union for any advice or action.'⁵⁵ The leadership of the Ibo Union clearly attempted to create a position of power for themselves as intermediaries between the colonial administration and Igbo migrants in Ibadan. They applied for official recognition of the union by the government, and after receiving a letter which stated that the administration had noted their existence,⁵⁶ strengthened their claims further, by arguing that: 'The Ibos resident in Ibadan form a large numerical unit, and only the Ibos themselves, and this Union in particular, can get at any one of them.' After donating the sum of £1.1/- to the government 'As an appreciation of the fine efforts Britain and her Allies are making to crush Hitler and his gangsters', they asked to be allowed to collect the poll and income taxes from all Igbo residents of Ibadan, and pay this in block to the tax officer. Although the administration was interested in the proposal, it was not accepted.⁵⁷

The political ambitions of the unions were not limited to the urban area. Of more importance, often, were their attempts to form a platform for urban dwellers to have some say in the affairs of the home towns. At least three factors facilitated this: the investing of money in the village by urban dwellers through the union, the fact that union officials were often working with government or mission and were therefore thought to be in a position to

⁵³ Mazi F. C. Ogbalu Funeral Committee, *The Passing of a Legend* 28.

⁵⁴ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large. Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis and London 1996) 181.

⁵⁵ NAI; IBADAN DIV. I/I 1888 F. U. Okonkwo to Senior District Officer Oyo Province, Ibadan, 9 August 1941.

⁵⁶ NAI; IBADAN DIV. I/I 1888 F. U. Okonkwo to Senior District Officer, Ibadan 4 August 1941 and reply dated 6 August; F. U. Okonkwo to Senior District Officer Oyo Province, Ibadan, 9 August 1941.

⁵⁷ NAI; IBADAN DIV. I/I 1888 F. U. Okonkwo to the Senior District Officer Ibadan Division, Ibadan, 10 September 1941; Reply, 12 Sept. 1941; F. U. Okonkwo to the District Officer, Ibadan 19 January 1942; F. U. Okonkwo to the Senior District Officer, Ibadan, 27 January 1942; Asst. District Officer to the Olubadan-in-Council, Ibadan 11 February 1942; Olubadan's Councillors to the Asst. District Officer Ibadan, 19 February 1942.

influence the administration, and the prestige that some unions achieved through settling disputes outside the courts.⁵⁸ In some cases, unions were established with the specific purpose of influencing affairs in the home town. For example, the Onitsha Union Home Branch was established in 1931 by Onitsha people living in Lagos who were attempting to influence the outcome of the political struggle between claimants to the throne of the Obi of Onitsha.⁵⁹

In the villages in the Igbo area, the unions initiated projects to develop the home towns campaigning for the construction of—and sometimes actually constructing—roads, bridges, schools, a post office, or market facilities.⁶⁰ Despite the continuous debate about such projects, few improvements were actually completed.⁶¹ In a number of cases, the unions became also active in settling disputes outside the official courts. Some unions were successful to the extent that the number of cases brought before the official courts declined considerably.⁶² For example, when in 1947 the Umunri native court was moved from Enugwu-Ukwu to neighbouring Abagana, the Enugwu-Ukwu Patriotic Union introduced a rule that no member of the town should litigate against another member in court, but instead should go to the town union to settle the dispute.⁶³

The political side of the unions was not limited to the relation between urban and rural, but was also concerned with the relation between the older and younger generations. According to the colonial debate on Igbo culture—and also according to many of the local debates—the leadership of local communities was in the hands of the older generation of chiefs and elders. This was reflected in the set-up of local administration which only allowed titled men and chiefs to become members of native courts and local administrations. Many relatively young, successful men who were active in business, or were working with the government or foreign firms, felt that this situation frustrated their ambitions for local power. They furthermore felt that their claims for power were justified because of their wealth, education, and experience with the British. Unable to become direct members of the officially recognized local bodies, they gained influence through the town unions. The prominence of the younger professionals in the unions is reflected in names such as the Ikwerre Youth Association, the Arochuku Youth League, and the Akaeze Youths Association. In this case, ‘youth’ does not refer merely to age, as many of the ‘young men’ were in their thirties or forties. While they used ‘youth’ to define themselves as belonging to a younger generation than the elders, it

⁵⁸ One of the unions was actually led by a court scribe (NAE; RIVPROF 2/1/86 Letter from Acting Resident, Owerri Province to Secretary, Eastern Provinces, Port Harcourt, 5 March 1947).

⁵⁹ Austin Ahanotu, ‘The role of ethnic unions in the development of Southern Nigeria: 1916-66’ in: Boniface Obichere, ed., *Studies in Southern Nigerian History* (London 1982) 171.

⁶⁰ PRO; CO 583 258/30150 Governor of Nigeria to Secretary of State for the Colonies, Lagos, 15 November 1943.

⁶¹ These projects were often conceived by Western educated, or part-educated, urban dwellers and were therefore part of a Western, modernizing paradigm of development that was not always suited to the rural situation. See for example: Enoch Okpara, *Perspectives in Settlement Processes in Igboland. The Case of Okwelle in Okigwe L.G.A. Imo State* (Owerri 1990) 13; Audrey C. Smock, ‘The NCNC and ethnic Unions in Biafra’, *Journal of Modern African Studies* 7.1 (1969) 21-34; there 25.

⁶² NAE; RIVPROF 2/1/86 Acting Resident, Owerri Province to Secretary, Eastern Provinces, Port Harcourt, 5 March 1947. The letter provides statistics for the years 1942-1946 and notes that the decline is far greater in those areas where town unions are dealing with cases. See also: *Nigeria. Report for the year 1954* (London 1958) 139.

⁶³ Incidentally, the union also bought the redundant court building from the administration and converted it into a town hall. Dilim Okafor-Omali, *A Nigerian Villager in Two Worlds* (London 1965) 149-150.

appears that most of the appeal of the term lay in its connection to modernity, as opposed to the association of elders with tradition, and with the notion of a fixed and ancient pre-colonial Igbo culture.

The notion of modernity allowed these men to claim that while the elders were incapable of dealing with the changes brought by colonialism, the younger men—as a result of their education and exposure to the world outside the home town—were better capable of functioning in the colonial society and of exploiting the options it offered for the benefit of their community. The successful younger men used these claims to try and secure positions on the local administration's official bodies as representatives of the town union.⁶⁴ In the process, the unions claimed recognition as alternative bodies of power on an equal level with—rather than subject to—the local authorities, occasionally resulting in power struggles between local authorities and unions. In the town of Abatete, for example, the power struggle between the Local Council and the Abatete Patriotic Union resulted in a crisis within the union which then divided the town. In an attempt to resolve this crisis an alternative body, the Abatete Youth League, was formed by a number of Abatete migrants living in the city of Enugu.⁶⁵ Although the Enugu initiative did not meet with long-term success, this example again points to the importance of the unions as a way for those living outside the town to wield some influence, using their contributions to the material development of the town as a lever. In a contribution to the 'Public opinion' section of the *West African Pilot* titled 'Slow progress in Awka', C. Nwogbo from Calabar not merely pointed out which improvements were needed in his home town—a spacious post office and a new hospital—but also instructed the Native Authority to work together with the town union to make sure that the proposed projects were actually completed.⁶⁶

For the social as well as the political functions of the unions, it was necessary for each union to clearly define its scope. While every union claimed to represent the entire community, its activities were often dominated by the members who were relatively young adults living and working outside the town. While the authority of the union was defined in very vague and broad terms, the criteria for membership had to be clear, since membership entailed financial and social obligations as well as benefits. The definition of membership was equally important for politically active leaders in order to support their claims to represent a certain population. The unions' membership came from different social groups. While those living in the villages were also defined as members, most of the active members were urban dwellers. They included clerks, teachers, businessmen and clergy. Although those pursuing a career in an urban centre through work or study were not always willing to actively participate in union activities,⁶⁷ many urban dwellers regarded the membership of a union as inescapable.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ There are quite a number of instances of this. See for example the opinions expressed in: NAE; RIVPROF 2/1/87 Native Authorities and Clan Unions (1947), the discussions in NAE; ONDIST 12/1/1055 Correspondence with Onitsha Improvement Union (1936-1939) and the brief overview in PRO; CO 583 214/30018 *Annual Report on the Southern Provinces of Nigeria 1935* (Lagos 1937) 39.

⁶⁵ C. C. Ndulue, *Abatete: Political and Economic History and some Aspects of Igbo Culture* (Enugu 1993) 56-60.

⁶⁶ *West African Pilot* 17 May 1950.

⁶⁷ Interview with barrister Amanke Okafor, Awka, 11 May 1994.

⁶⁸ H. Smythe and M. Smythe, *The New Nigerian Elite* (Stanford 1960) 29.

The membership of a union tended to be defined as those originating from one town or clan, district or division, resulting in hundreds of different town and district unions. During the 1930s, in a few major urban centres unions emerged that addressed the Igbo migrants as a group. Membership of these unions did not, however, consist of individuals, but rather of the several town and district unions representing the different parts of the Igbo area. The member unions sent delegates to the meetings of the general Igbo union, while on special occasions the Igbo unions also organized rallies for which all Igbo individuals were invited. Of these unions with a more widely defined membership, the Lagos Ibo Union and the Ibo Union, Kano, were the most active. The union in Kano funded and developed private educational facilities for the Igbo community. The quality of the education these provided was such that it was relatively easy for Igbo to find work in Kano. Although the Igbo union was accused of being clannish in providing education for the own group, the Kano town council (made up of non-Igbo) had to admit in its Kano Twenty-Year Plan that the establishment of private schools for Igbo was the result of the failure of the local educational authorities to provide adequate facilities.⁶⁹ The activities of the Ibo Union, Kano, were not limited to education. It was, according to the Twenty-Year Plan the most important social organization in the Kano Sabon Gari, with which the Igbo from the Sabon Gari as well as from other parts of Kano identified.⁷⁰

The cultural activities of the unions related to the definition of their membership as well as to the social aims of the unions. Most cultural activities took place within the context of the unions' meetings that were held regularly in the cities, often weekly (on Sunday), sometimes once a month. Igbo was usually spoken, while minutes were kept in English.⁷¹ The main function of these meetings was social. The Onitsha, Owerri and Awka unions had special halls constructed where they held their regular meetings, and which were also used for parties, dance nights, send-offs and welcome receptions. The halls could also be hired by individual members to celebrate weddings and births, as well as for burial ceremonies.⁷² Judging from the number of receptions and send-offs that were announced and reported in the newspapers, organizing receptions must have been one of the main activities of the unions. However, the members were also brought together around traditional dances and ceremonies which expressed the solidarity of the members with one another, with their home town, and with their cultural heritage. The constitutions of many unions mentioned the preservation of Igbo culture as one of the union's main objectives.⁷³

The staging of what they referred to as 'native' dances was among the most popular cultural activities organized by the unions. On 2 January, 1949, for example, the Onitsha Ladies Progressive Club in Lagos organized an *Akpali* dance that drew a crowd of over 1,000 spectators, both Europeans and Africans. Eight dances were performed by a group of thirty dancers and two leading singers, all dressed in a light yellow uniform with little bells around

⁶⁹ John Paden, 'Communal competition, conflict and violence in Kano' in: Robert Melson and Howard Wolpe, eds., *Nigeria: Modernization and the Politics of Communalism* (Michigan 1971) 129.

⁷⁰ *Ibidem*. I briefly discussed the sabon garis in chapter 3.

⁷¹ Audrey C. Smock, *Ibo Politics: the Role of Ethnic Unions in Eastern Nigeria* (Cambridge, MA 1971) 137, 147.

⁷² Ahanotu, 'The role of ethnic unions' 161-162.

⁷³ NAE; PHDIST 3/1/83 Aims and objects of the Ibo Union Port Harcourt. A more general discussion of the unions' aims can be found in Ahanotu, 'The role of ethnic unions' 166.

their waist. The review of the dance in the *West African Pilot* not only praised the superb song and dance, but also pointed out the 'native' function of the dance of praising the good and denouncing the bad in order to improve communal relations. Although certain authentic elements, such as the drums, were missing from this urban performance, the paper concluded that it 'was not in the least robbed of any attributes of dignity and artistry for which Ibo dances are noted'.⁷⁴ The Lagos branch of the Awka District Union advertised its dance as 'the first place Winner in the famous ALL-NIGERIA DANCE, 1948'.⁷⁵ These dances were often organized by women's groups within the unions, reflecting a perception of Igbo dance as a female affair (unlike the masquerades, which were typically male). Although in practice urban dance troupes could be founded and financed by male entrepreneurs,⁷⁶ the unions stressed the femininity of Igbo dances. Not only were the performances organized by women's groups, the guests of honour also tended to be females, often successful businesswomen or the wives of colonial officers. Rather than being presented as generalized Igbo dances, most dances were presented as local dances, linked to a specific town in the Igbo area either through its performers or through the style of the dance.⁷⁷ As I have mentioned above, culture was usually perceived in local terms.

The unions further linked cultural activities to the local context, rather than an Igbo context, through their arranging of trips back to the village in order to attend local festivals. Although these activities certainly represent the promoting of aspects of culture that are considered part of Igbo culture, these bodies were not usually promoting Igbo culture in the sense that they did not usually use the term Igbo, and did not stress the connection of the town's local culture to that of other Igbo cultures. There were, however, a few exceptions to this general observation, for example, the lectures organized by the Lagos Ibo Union on such topics as 'A review of the affairs of Iboland'.⁷⁸

⁷⁴ 'Onitsha Ladies Stage Grand African Folk Dance In Yaba', *West African Pilot* 7 January 1949.

⁷⁵ *West African Pilot* 26 April 1950.

⁷⁶ Sylvia Leith-Ross, *African Conversation Piece* (London, New York and Melbourne [1944]) 41-47.

⁷⁷ 'Lagos Ibo Union honours Dr Zik with variety of dances', *West African Pilot* 19 October 1954. While often the guests of honour at a performance were female, in the case of this series of dances in the Yaba Stadium, it was different. Azikiwe did not grace the event with his presence, although it was organized in his honour.

⁷⁸ *West African Pilot* 24 April 1950 (Front page announcement: 'LECTURE! LECTURE!! LECTURE!!!').

The limitations of the actions of the Igbo unions are clear: from the 1920s through to the 1940s a union was usually conceived as a 'town union', creating a network across Nigeria of people with links to one particular village or town in the Igbo area. There were also a number of 'district unions' which tried to unite the different town unions representing the Igbo towns that had been grouped together by the colonial administration in one district. Finally, in only a few cities there existed 'Igbo unions' which claimed to represent all Igbo migrants in that city. No organization existed that attempted to unite all the Igbo living in different parts of Nigeria and to protect their interests. It became only possible to promote Igbo culture all over Nigeria as a commonly shared Igbo culture following the establishment of the Ibo State Union in the late 1940s. Even though most of the unions' activities continued to be organized on a local level, the State Union at least provided a body through which their policies and actions could be coordinated.

Nevertheless, several unsuccessful attempts at the formation of a general Igbo union had been made in places such as Lagos, Aba and Port Harcourt since the beginning of the 1930s.⁷⁹ In 1933, the establishment of an Igbo union was advocated in a letter published in the *Nigerian Daily Telegraph* which spoke of a 'rebirth of the dying embers of Ibo national zeal'.⁸⁰ The Ibo Union which was founded in 1938 with its headquarters 'for the time being in Onitsha', had as its goal the 'ultimate unification of the Ibo Tribe' through the incorporation into the union of all the existing town and clan unions.⁸¹ The union, whose membership mainly consisted of Igbo who were not themselves natives of Onitsha,⁸² did not achieve this goal. Not only did it not succeed in expanding outside Onitsha, it did not even manage to unify the different Igbo groups residing within Onitsha. A similar fate befell the Ibo Federal Union that was founded in Lagos in 1944,⁸³ following a campaign that had been launched the previous year by the general secretary of the Ibo Union, Lagos.⁸⁴ The Ibo Federal Union was launched during an 'Ibo mass meeting' which had been announced in the newspapers as an important event where 'all Ibo-speaking peoples who are resident in Lagos will make it a point of national duty to be present'.⁸⁵ It appears that the attendance was lower than expected by the organizers, which was blamed on the heavy rains. The meeting nevertheless claimed to be representative of the Igbo community and decided to petition the Colonial Government to increase Ibo representation in the Legislative Council. The meeting also decided to strive for the political unification of the Igbo through the federation of all existing Igbo unions in one Ibo Federal Union, which would have as its primary concern the establishment of an Igbo education scheme for which funds would be raised among the Igbo themselves. Among the distinguished speakers at the meeting

⁷⁹ Azikiwe, *My Odyssey: an Autobiography* (New York 1970) 236-238, 245; Ahanotu, 'The role of ethnic unions' 166.

⁸⁰ Ejitu Nnechi Ota, *Ethnic nationalism in Nigeria: a comparative study of the Ibibio and the Ibo Unions, 1928-1966* (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Calabar 1995) 75.

⁸¹ NAE; ONDIST 12/1/1667 The constitution of the Ibo Union with headquarters at Onitsha (Nigeria) founded, 1938.

⁸² NAE; CSE 1/85/9489 C. G. Shute, Inspection Notes: Onitsha Province, 2-7 November 1942.

⁸³ *West African Pilot* 19 June 1944.

⁸⁴ J. S. Coleman, *Nigeria. Background to Nationalism* (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1958; reprinted 1971) 314.

⁸⁵ 'Ibo Mass Meeting will be held next Saturday', *West African Pilot* 16 June 1944.

was Nnamdi Azikiwe who at that time was already politically active, although the NCNC had not yet been founded. Azikiwe argued that the Igbo had not yet been united because of superstition and ignorance, and that the Igbo, blessed as they were with natural resources, land and manpower, as well as a common language, 'could achieve a great deal if they would unite'.⁸⁶

More explicit plans for the education scheme were announced in September during another Igbo meeting. The scheme was to establish six secondary schools in different parts of the Igbo area, at a total cost of £30,000, to be raised in five years from voluntary contributions and from quotas to be met by member unions. A promising start was made during the meeting: £955 was raised.⁸⁷ Immediately following the meeting, the *West African Pilot* reported that the Awka District Union, the Owerri Improvement Union, the Nnewi District Association, and the Aro Ndizuogu Union together were willing to collect and pay £20,000 to the education scheme, provided the first four secondary schools to be established by the Ibo Federal Union would be erected in Awka, Owerri, Nnewi and Aro Ndizuogu respectively.⁸⁸ In spite of these encouraging first reports, nothing more was heard of the scheme and no mass meetings were organized until December 1945, when a first Ibo Federal Conference was held in Lagos. During this meeting, general statements were made about the proposed schools, such as the size of the schoolyards and the minimum qualifications of the staff, and an Igbo education tax was instituted of three shillings per head annually.⁸⁹ However, a discussion of the progress of fund-raising was postponed until March 1946, when an Igbo meeting was held to discuss the first results of the education scheme. Although a donation is mentioned of £160 from Igbo soldiers in Southeast Asia, and Port Harcourt reportedly collected over £1000, the fund-raising was not very successful, and the assembly was urged to pay their quotas in instalments and not to wait with their payment until the end of the scheme's five years.⁹⁰ In a newspaper article, the Union's general secretary, B. O. N. Eluwa, referred to the many pledges made towards the education fund by 'Ibomen and a handful of Ibo women' which had not yet been honoured, asking them to 'Please pay up your tax and liquidate your donation debt and so enable us to set up one of the colleges say early this year. It will increase our national hopes. It will mobilise our morals. It will spur us to more action.'⁹¹ During 1947, the Union organized a campaign to collect funds for the education scheme for which a tour was made throughout the Igbo area. The proceeds were insufficient to fund the Union's education scheme entirely; only one Igbo national school was built, in Aba, for which Nnamdi Azikiwe laid the foundation stone in

⁸⁶ 'Ibos decide to send government petition for increased representation in Legco', *West African Pilot* 19 June 1944; see also the editorial in the same issue and 'Ibo Federal Union petitions the Chief Secretary for nine seats in the Legco', *West African Pilot* 21 July 1944.

⁸⁷ 'Mass meeting announced for 1 p.m.', *West African Pilot* 16 September 1944; 'Ibos subscribe £955 towards education in Glover Hall mass meeting', *West African Pilot* 18 September 1944.

⁸⁸ *West African Pilot* 20 September 1944: Front page headline: IBO UNION MAY RECEIVE £20,000 FROM ALLIED GROUPS PROVIDED SECONDARY SCHOOLS ARE ESTABLISHED; Editorial: 'The Ibo nation and education'; 'Inside stuff by "Zik": Ibo Union may receive £20,000'.

⁸⁹ 'First Ibo Federal Conference proposes an Ibo National Bank with a capital of £1 million', *West African Pilot* 23 January 1946.

⁹⁰ 'Huge mass meeting of Ibos discuss first fruit of Ibo Education Scheme', *West African Pilot* 11 March 1946.

⁹¹ Contribution to 'Public opinion' by B. O. N. Eluwa, *West African Pilot* 4 February 1946.

December 1948.⁹²

The Ibo Federal Union was not very active outside the sphere of education. During its first Federal Conference in 1945 it launched a scheme to start an Ibo National Bank with a starting capital of £1 million made up of £1 shares,⁹³ but this plan was never implemented, probably because it was somewhat unrealistic to start with. Furthermore, general secretary Eluwa wrote contributions to the *West African Pilot* in support of an Igbo federation and the education scheme, and arguing for a dynamic Igbo national spirit.

The Union was especially unsuccessful in achieving its goal of forming a federation of the existing Igbo unions. Throughout its existence, its membership remained limited in a geographical sense (confined to the Lagos area) as well as in numbers (after six months of existence it had still only nine member unions⁹⁴). Hence it could not act as the representative body of all Igbo with the government or other administrative or political bodies.⁹⁵ The limited success of the Federal Union and other attempts to organize the Igbo as a group can be explained by two factors. On the one hand, many town unions and Igbo individuals must have felt that the membership of a general Igbo union merely amounted to the paying of membership fees and levies with no (or very uncertain) benefits in return. On the other hand, it reflects the fact that, as Eluwa feared, an Igbo national spirit was indeed largely absent. The notion of Igbo identity had begun to spread among Igbo intellectuals and professionals only as recently as the 1930s. By the 1940s the notion had become fairly generally accepted among urban dwellers, but it was still relatively unfamiliar in the rural areas at the end of the 1940s.⁹⁶ This latter fact was observed by Eluwa when touring the communities in the East following a decision by the Federal Union that the president or general-secretary 'should tour the country (particularly Iboland) to deliver lectures and establish personal contacts'.⁹⁷ He noted that many villagers 'couldn't even imagine all Ibos'.⁹⁸

After months without there being any signs of activities aimed at uniting the different Igbo groups, the *West African Pilot* reported that more than 10,000 Igbo had attended the first Pan-Ibo Confab held in Aba in December 1948.⁹⁹ The meeting constituted an important

⁹² *West African Pilot* 4 January 1949.

⁹³ *West African Pilot* 23 January 1946. Apart from a front page article, the paper thought the idea was worth a three-inch headline reading 'IBO NATIONAL BANK WITH £1,000,000 CAPITAL IS PROPOSED', as well as an editorial in its 26 January issue.

⁹⁴ *West African Pilot* 18 September 1944.

⁹⁵ Its name was not even among those of the organizations supporting the formation of the NCNC in August 1944. The list of unions and organizations supporting the Council included several town unions from the Igbo area and the Western Ibo Union, but not the Ibo Federal Union. 'Delegates from Nigerian associations and societies form National Council', *West African Pilot* 28 August 1944.

⁹⁶ Smock, *Ibo Politics* 18.

⁹⁷ *West African Pilot* 23 January 1946.

⁹⁸ Eluwa is quoted in David Abernethy, *The Political Dilemma of Popular Education* (Stanford 1969) 110.

⁹⁹ 'Ten Thousand Ibos Attend First Pan-Ibo Confab. Zik Lays Foundation Stone Of First State College At Aba', *West African Pilot* 4 January 1949. The problem with this meeting is that to my knowledge there exist only two contemporary sources: the newspaper report and B. O. N. Eluwa's letter to the Education Department (which is only concerned with language and not with the meeting as such; NAE; MINED 5/1/20). In view of the propaganda function of the reporting the number of Igbo present at the meeting must have been grossly exaggerated, and it is possible that only a few people attended the event. The number of people present is not the only question regarding this meeting as other authors discussing the event, notably Richard Sklar, situate the meeting in Port Harcourt (later the location of the headquarters

moment in the history of promoting Igbo identity, not only because of the contents of the discussions, but even more so because of the image it created of a common goal for the Igbo. It was on this occasion that Azikiwe laid the foundation stone for what became the Ibo National Secondary School. The meeting also discussed the problems of the Igbo language, and denounced and rejected the orthography proposed by the administration 'on behalf of Ibos everywhere'.¹⁰⁰ More important was that it was also the meeting during which the formation of the Ibo State Union was announced. Although the Federal Union and the State Union co-existed for some time,¹⁰¹ the latter was to succeed the former. B. O. N. Eluwa was part of the State Union executive as Permanent Under-Secretary from the beginning, while other individuals similarly combined offices in both unions.¹⁰² In both cases, the leaders belonged to the educated elite: professionals, businessmen, a police inspector, and politicians. The real difference in terms of people was the involvement of Azikiwe as leader of the State Union, which explains the State Union's success in achieving publicity as well as its political position.

While after 1952 the Ibo State Union did not play a major role in politics and concentrated on social and cultural activities,¹⁰³ it was founded with an explicit political aim: to 'organise the Ibo linguistic group into a political unit, in accordance with the N.C.N.C. Freedom Charter'.¹⁰⁴ The Freedom Charter had been adopted by the NCNC the previous April as its official policy document; written by Azikiwe,¹⁰⁵ it reflected the same opinions he had expressed previously, principally the demand for Nigerian independence within 15 years, and the view of an independent Nigeria as a federation of autonomous ethnically-defined states, including states for the Igbo, Yoruba, Hausa and Efik. Azikiwe also expressed this view in his address to the Pan-Ibo Conference on 'The place of Ibo State in the N.C.N.C. Freedom Charter'. The State Union's secretariat had even prepared a map of the proposed Igbo state.¹⁰⁶ From the very beginning, Azikiwe and the State Union stressed that the aim was a restructuring of the Nigerian federation,¹⁰⁷ not to propose the unilateral secession of the Igbo from the federation.

Although the Ibo State Union had been founded to serve a political purpose, it did not neglect Igbo culture and appointed a 'Cultural Advisor' among its first set of officers. In order to strengthen Igbo national consciousness, article 2 of the Ibo State Union's *Constitution* stressed 'the promotion of cultural understanding among the various groups in Iboland at home

of the Ibo State Union) rather than Aba (Richard Sklar, *Nigerian Political Parties* (Princeton 1963; New York and Enugu 1983) 70). However, I follow the *Pilot* and Eluwa and assume that the meeting was held at Aba, also because this was indeed the location of the Ibo State College, where the meeting was said to have been held.

¹⁰⁰ NAE; MINED 5/1/20 Letter Nwammo Eluwa, General Secretary, Ibo Federal Union, to the Director of Education, Port Harcourt, 27 January 1949.

¹⁰¹ NAE; ONDIST 12/1/2094 Minutes of the first Ibo State Assembly, June 1949.

¹⁰² *West African Pilot* 4 January 1949.

¹⁰³ Anene, An aspect of Igbo history. See also Sklar's analysis of the unofficial dimension of party structure in *Nigerian Political Parties*, 461.

¹⁰⁴ *West African Pilot* 4 January 1949.

¹⁰⁵ Sklar, *Nigerian Political Parties* 63. Although, officially, Azikiwe is not the author of the pamphlet, the claims of other prominent NCNC-leaders that he was, combined with the similarities with older publications by Azikiwe, identify him as the writer of the document.

¹⁰⁶ *West African Pilot* 4 January 1949.

¹⁰⁷ *West African Pilot* 12 August 1955.

and abroad' as one of the union's main aims.¹⁰⁸ The Ibo State Union also paid attention to education. It continued the collections in Eastern Nigeria that had been initiated by the Federal Union to raise funds for Igbo education, especially the project of establishing Igbo national colleges throughout the Igbo area. Other activities were also organized, mainly in Lagos, to raise funds for the same project. These activities were announced in Azikiwe's own newspapers, often on the front page.¹⁰⁹ The fund-raising activities included an education week, with lectures, dances and collections. Funds were also raised through a charity football match between the 'Ibo Ladies Invincibles' and the 'Ibo Middle-aged Men Impregnable' held in Lagos in May 1950, with Azikiwe as the referee.¹¹⁰ A newspaper report of the match referred to the 'tenacious spirit of adventure, quickness of mind, and determination to adapt themselves to any condition' that has characterized the Igbo from their origins, and which now apparently explained why 'Our forty-eights, and above, despite their cranky joints, forgot their old age, honour and dignity, and rolled about on the slippery grass just to build a lasting edifice for posterity.'¹¹¹ Although the report did not mention which side won the match, it did complain bitterly about the lack of interest among the youth for the progress of the Igbo group in general, and for the match in particular. Lack of financial support was a persisting problem for the State Union. At one stage, the Union even came up with accusations of sabotage to explain why so few financial contributions were made.¹¹² It did, nevertheless, manage to acquire sufficient funds to complete the Ibo National Secondary School in Aba, which was officially opened in 1952. However, it could not implement the rest of the education scheme originally formulated by the Federal Union. Later, other 'Ibo National Schools' were founded in different towns in the Igbo area, but these were built and managed by local town and district unions, and not by the Ibo State Union.¹¹³

The Ibo State Union was organized according to the same principle as the Federal Union: membership of the Ibo State Union was made up of the existing Igbo town and district unions and not of individuals. Also, just as the town unions claimed authority over all inhabitants of the town they represented, the Ibo State Union explicitly claimed authority over *all* Igbo, vesting in its Assembly the power to discipline any Igbo man or woman.¹¹⁴ This was a bold claim, since in actual fact the State Union represented only a small part of the Igbo population. Although its leaders aimed at including all branches of all Igbo unions into the State Union, only a fraction of the existing unions actually took up membership status. Many Igbo were members of town unions that were not affiliated to the State Union, while many others were members of no union at all. The State Union considered these people to be 'lost sheep' who

¹⁰⁸ PRO; CO 957 8 *The Ibo State Union Constitution* (Port Harcourt n.d.[this version last amended 1954]).

¹⁰⁹ *West African Pilot* 8 September 1951.

¹¹⁰ *West African Pilot* 8, 11, 12, and 13 May 1950. Initially, Azikiwe was billed as one of the players. However, according to the 11 May article, Mrs Jessie Uzor, president of the Lagos Ibo Union (women section) took a special objection to Zik being a player, although she agreed to him being allowed to play as a goalkeeper, without his glasses on. In the end, he became the referee.

¹¹¹ Ekwewke Obiora, 'An appreciation', *West African Pilot* 31 May 1950.

¹¹² *West African Pilot* 25 March 1950.

¹¹³ Ahanotu, 'The role of ethnic unions' 165.

¹¹⁴ PRO; CO 957 8 *The Ibo State Union Constitution*.

had to be returned to the fold, but was unsuccessful in doing so.¹¹⁵ Several times, the State Union attempted to raise interest in the organization and increase the number of registered clan and town unions by touring the Igbo area as this was regarded as 'the only way whereby those in the hinterland could be got to understand the problems of the unions which call for the co-operation of all Ibo people.'¹¹⁶ These efforts were not successful. The reasons for this, according to Audrey Smock, were the entrance fee and the yearly contribution, while membership brought hardly any advantages to the member unions.¹¹⁷ On the contrary, membership brought a lot of work: the branch unions were expected to hold collections and sell buttons and Ibo State Almanacs, the proceeds of which went to the State Union, while they were also told to organize events thought up by the Union's executive committee and act as intermediaries between the central level and the individual members.

Towards redemption: The 1949 Ibo State Assembly

The 1948 Pan-Ibo Confab was the first in a series of meetings organized by the Ibo State Union, that tried to bring together representatives from the different parts of the Igbo area to form 'the parliament of the Ibo nation'. The State Union instituted a regular series of Ibo State Assemblies, the first of which was held at Aba in June 1949. According to the minutes of the meeting, nearly two thousand representatives from the various parts of the Igbo area attended the assembly which was opened with a presidential address by Azikiwe on 'Self-determination for the Ibo Nation'.¹¹⁸ The address, which was later printed in the *West African Pilot*, starts from the observation that the Igbo as a group are victimized and discriminated, listing at least eight major grievances, from bad roads through to being labelled the group that is 'the most hated in Nigeria' in British newspapers. After these observations, Azikiwe pointed towards the Igbo determination 'to suffer wrong no more', which could be achieved through achieving self-determination for the Igbo along the lines of the NCNC Freedom Charter.¹¹⁹ The State Assembly then discussed some of the grievances, especially the Minerals, Mineral oils and Lands ordinances that had recently been imposed by the colonial administration and which were considered to be partial to the British. The assembly decided to bring the matter before the World Court, but took no further action. Other matters discussed were the goal of unifying the Igbo group to 'include every bit of Iboland in the Ibo State', and the need to draft an official constitution for the Ibo State, which would include various customary laws from the different parts of the Igbo area.¹²⁰ The meeting ended with a farewell message from Azikiwe, intended:

to enable you to grasp the kernel of our deliberations, in order to explain it to those who sent

¹¹⁵ NAE; OGPROF 2/1/2509 Minutes of the Ibo State Assembly held at Port Harcourt 17 and 18 December 1955.

¹¹⁶ *West African Pilot* 25 March 1950.

¹¹⁷ Smock, *Ibo Politics* 169.

¹¹⁸ NAE; ONDIST 12/1/2094 Minutes of the Ibo State Assembly held at Aba, 25 and 26 June 1949.

¹¹⁹ 'From a Presidential address delivered at the Ibo State Assembly held at Aba on Saturday, June 25, 1949,' in: *Zik: a Selection of Speeches of Nnamdi Azikiwe, Governor-General of the Federation of Nigeria, formerly President of the Nigerian State, formerly Premier of the Eastern Region of Nigeria*, edited by Phillip Harris (Cambridge 1961) 242-246.

you to Aba as missionaries of freedom and ambassadors of enlightenment. Go back to the folks at home, and tell them that the sons and daughters of the Ibo nation are alive to their great heritage.

Tell them that the Ibo giant is waking from his stupor and is asserting his inalienable rights in the scheme of things in this great country of Nigeria and the Cameroons. Tell them that the Ibo stands solidly behind the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons.

This political declaration (which was of course not surprising coming from the leader of the NCNC) was followed by a list of grievances largely similar to the one expressed in the opening address, in each case accompanied with the statement that the Igbo will no longer accept that situation. Azikiwe stressed that as law-abiding people, tax-payers and 'pure democrats', the Igbo people demanded a fair and equal treatment from the administration and no longer accepted being regarded and treated as an 'inferior people, even in our own God-given country.' The address ended with an appeal to those present to:

make it clear to our folk in the villages and towns in Ibo-land that as a nation with a glorious tradition and historic past, the Ibo nation demands from the protecting power freedom from persecution, freedom from ostracization, freedom from victimization, and freedom from discrimination.

These things shall be; a mighty nation shall rise again in the West of the Sudan, with love of freedom in their sinews; and it shall come to pass that the Ibo shall emerge, to suffer wrong no more, and to re-write the history written by their ancestors. It is the voice of Destiny and we must answer this call for freedom and respect in our life-time. The God of Africa has willed it. It is the handwriting on the wall. It is our manifest destiny.¹²¹

The first Ibo State Assembly, its discussions and the speeches by Azikiwe represent an important moment in the history of the promoting of Igbo identity for a number of reasons. First, it helped to increase the reach of the Igbo nationalists who now started to use the Ibo State Union to spread their ideas to the entire population defined as 'Igbo' by them, if not by the people themselves. These ideas included the very notion of the existence of an Igbo nation. The 1949 State Assembly was also important because it shows that politics are an essential aspect of the project of promoting Igbo identity, in spite of the continuous references made to language and culture as the defining features of the Igbo group. Although the proposed Ibo State would be based on 'ethnic and linguistic factors',¹²² the notion did not emerge as a consequence of these factors, but essentially as a consequence of the Nigerian political situation at that moment. The timing was essential: the 1940s were the years of NCNC agitation for independence from Britain and of protest against a new Nigerian constitution drafted by the colonial government. The government, however, tended to ignore the objections raised by Azikiwe and his fellow nationalists on the familiar grounds that as representatives of

¹²⁰ NAE: ONDIST 12/1/2094 Minutes of the Ibo State Assembly held at Aba, 25 and 26 June 1949.

¹²¹ 'A farewell message delivered at the close of the Ibo State Assembly convened under the auspices of the Ibo State Union at Aba on June 26, 1949' in: *Zik: a Selection of Speeches of Nnamdi Azikiwe* (Cambridge 1961) 246-249.

¹²² From a presidential address delivered at the Ibo State Assembly held at Aba, 246.

the educated elite they could speak for only a small percentage of the population.¹²³ During this period, the NCNC tried to gain and prove a popular backing for its policies in many different ways, including touring the country and holding rallies. The Ibo State Union appears to have been another way of achieving support for the NCNC. It was one that could backfire, as it tended to strengthen the existing notion that the NCNC was dominated by the Igbo, but was nevertheless effective in the short term. Many Igbo unions followed the line of the State Union and wrote to the Administration opposing the new constitution and in support of the NCNC.¹²⁴ The effectiveness of the union network for communicating ideas was recognized by the Colonial Government, who discredited the unions' letters and telegrams on the grounds that the ethnic unions did not represent the opinion of the rural population, but merely voiced the opinion of the NCNC.¹²⁵ Although it has been claimed that Azikiwe did not set out to become the leader of the State Union, but had its presidency thrust upon him by the other Igbo leaders,¹²⁶ the office placed him in a good position to increase the already considerable Igbo support for the NCNC, by explicitly linking the future of the Igbo nation to NCNC policies.

Azikiwe's choice of terms for discussing the future of the Igbo nation is relevant. He describes his vision for the future of the Igbo as 'the voice of Destiny', willed by 'The God of Africa', thereby not only denying that the Igbo might have a choice in their future, but also carving a role for himself as an Igbo political prophet. This image was strengthened in statements by other Igbo nationalists who presented him as the saviour of the Igbo. One Marshall Kebbi, for example, wrote in the *West African Pilot* that God 'has visited and redeemed His people and has raised up a mighty salvation for us in the house of his servant Azikiwe of Onitsha by the banks of the lordly Niger', concluding that 'When Zik came, came also the light.'¹²⁷ Ike, in the concluding chapter of *The Origin of the Ibos* described a vision of 'the Christ of our age whom they call Zik' who handed out 'the African sermon on the mount'. In Ike's prophecy, Azikiwe bade him 'to tell the Ibos that theirs is the sacred duty of instructing the peoples with whom they mingle, on the knowledge of the one true God.'¹²⁸ These notions had a profound impact upon the urban as well as rural Igbo population, including the illiterate. According to one observer, 'In Iboland, and among virtually all Ibos spread throughout Nigeria, Azikiwe was deified: his name became a legend; he was the incarnation of all their hopes and aspirations.'¹²⁹ To many Igbo it was unclear whether Azikiwe was to be regarded as a mere mortal or as a spirit.¹³⁰

Azikiwe's concern with Igbo redemption through the medium of the Ibo State Union secured his position as the political leader of the Igbo, and provided him with the solid support of the Igbo for NCNC-policies. At the same time, it raised suspicion about his nationalist

¹²³ PRO; CO 583 286/30453 A. B. Cohen, Notes by Richards' proposals, dated 9 August 1944.

¹²⁴ PRO; CO 583 268/30453 contains many memoranda from Igbo unions (but also some from non-Igbo unions).

¹²⁵ PRO; CO 583 268/30453 Note by C. I. D. on NCNC, enclosed with letter from the Governor, 29 March 1945.

¹²⁶ Sklar, *Nigerian Political Parties* 70-71.

¹²⁷ *West African Pilot* 3 October 1955.

¹²⁸ Akwaelumo Ike, *The Origin of the Ibos* (Aba 1950) 16-17.

¹²⁹ Coleman, *Nigeria. Background to Nationalism* 290.

¹³⁰ Emmanuel Obiechina, *An African Popular Literature. A Study of Onitsha Market Pamphlets* (London 1973) 91. This was especially the case following an episode, during the early 1950s, in which Azikiwe claimed that his political enemies, including the colonial administration, had attempted to assassinate him.

credentials among non-Igbo. His political enemies used the event—and his popularity among the Igbo in general—to prove that Azikiwe was a tribalist who wanted the Igbo to dominate Nigeria. Action Group leader Obafemi Awolowo, for example, argued that ‘in spite of his protestations to the contrary, Dr. Azikiwe was himself an unabashed Ibo jingoist. And he gave the game completely away ... in his presidential address to the Ibo Federal [sic] Union in 1949.’¹³¹ Indeed, although Azikiwe placed most of the blame for the suffering of the Igbo on the British, he defined the Igbo group largely in terms of differences from the other Nigerian groups. He even accused the other groups of discriminating against the Igbo and of preventing the Igbo from receiving a fair share of the national cake. Not explicitly mentioned, but present in the memory of most of the delegates to the assembly and readers of the *West African Pilot*, were the recent clashes between Igbo and Yoruba in Lagos.¹³² These recent events would have rendered the complaints about discrimination and victimization as all the more real and urgent. From the above discussion of Azikiwe's speeches and their impact, it is clear that the founding of the Ibo State Union and its first Assembly were not relevant merely for developing an infrastructure through which Igbo culture would be promoted, but that these events also helped to shape the contents of Igbo identity. At this stage in the process of promoting Igbo-ness, Igbo politicians defined Igbo identity around shared grievances as much as around shared culture. A perception of the Igbo being treated unfairly has remained one of the main aspects of Igbo identity until the end of the period under study (and until this very day).¹³³

Later Ibo State Assemblies

Throughout the 1950s, Ibo State Assemblies that followed the pattern of the first Assembly were held once or twice a year, convened through circular letters to the member unions (usually referred to as ‘branches’), newspaper announcements and, later, broadcasts on the Nigerian radio.¹³⁴ Each time, the assembly was held in a different major urban centre in the Igbo area, including Onitsha, Enugu, Umuahia, Owerri and Port Harcourt.¹³⁵ In principle, the assemblies were made up of delegates representing the Igbo from the different towns and districts of the Igbo area and the Igbo communities in non-Igbo urban centres in Nigeria and the Cameroons—not from the member unions. The number of representatives allowed to each

¹³¹ Obafemi Awolowo, *Awo. The Autobiography of Chief Obafemi Awolowo* (London, New York and Ibadan 1960) 172.

¹³² Sklar, *Nigerian Political Parties* 71.

¹³³ On this issue, see chapter 9 for more details and references.

¹³⁴ *West African Pilot* 12 January 1950; NAE; ONDIST 12/1/1667 Circular D. K. Onwenu to branches, Ibo State Union, 13 August 1955; the use of the radio by the Ibo State Union is mentioned by Ota, *Ethnic Nationalism in Nigeria*, 303.

¹³⁵ The indigenous population of the area that after 1914 became the colonial city of Port Harcourt is not usually regarded as belonging to the Igbo group, but the Igbo soon made up the majority of those living and working in the city. The city had been established as a port and terminus of the Eastern railway to the Udi, now Enugu, coal mine and was named after the Secretary of State for the Colonies, L. V. Harcourt. During the 1950s and 1960s the Igbo claimed that Port Harcourt was an Igbo town, a claim that was disputed by the local population (I. F. Nicolson, *The Administration of Nigeria 1900-1960: Men, Methods and Myths* (Oxford 1969) 190; Smock, *Ibo Politics* 121; Coleman, *Nigeria. Background to Nationalism* 73).

town depended on the number of member unions there were in the town.¹³⁶ Also present were the Executive Committee of the State Union and a number of invitees. It is unclear how many delegates actually attended the assemblies. At the 1955 State Assembly there were only 48 people present,¹³⁷ while reports of the first assemblies mention hundreds and sometimes even up to thousands of people attending.¹³⁸ These latter figures seem to be inflated in view of the repeatedly expressed concern that the Igbo population were not sufficiently aware of the activities of the State Union. Following the February 1950 Ibo State Assembly, an editorial in the *West African Pilot* remarked that: 'It is not enough to send occasional short and dry telegrams announcing or altering the date of the annual assembly' urging the Union's Executive that: 'The ubiquitous Ibo man needs to be made more conscious by being introduced into the detailed plans and achievements of his State Union.'¹³⁹ To an important extent this was already happening, not only through the newspaper articles which reported on the assemblies, but also through special meetings organized shortly after the assembly by the various member unions in order to discuss the outcome of the State Assembly.¹⁴⁰

The assemblies, which lasted two or three days, followed a standard pattern of Christian opening prayers, an opening address from the president of the Ibo State Union, after which the agenda prepared by the Executive Committee was followed. After this, there was the time for petitions and resolutions from the different branches. Many of the petitions from the branches were concerned with very local matters, such as the need for a road to a particular town or village, or a post office or hospital, or a demand that a local railway station should be upgraded to a booking and boarding station. Other branches had more general concerns, often relating to Igbo culture. For example, the Ibo Union, Enugu, wanted to work towards better relations between Igbo and other national groups in Nigeria, as well as towards the preservation of Igbo traditions and culture. The Asa Clan Union was more outspoken, as it warned the Christian churches against their 'studied destruction of Ibo national and folk ways by ex-communicating their members who honour these cultural aspects of the Ibo society'.¹⁴¹ The Ibo Union Lagos suggested that the State Union should decide on a reduction of the bride price to a token sum. This led to a discussion with ardent appeals from various delegates. The Lagos representative was the most outspoken on the issue. He argued that the exorbitant bride price made it impossible for young Igbo men to appreciate the State Union's 'talk about Ibo national solidarity, cultural, political and economic possibilities' and quoted several instances where lovers had separated because the would-be bridegrooms had been unable to produce the required amount for his 'capitalist' father-in-law. Thereupon the Assembly decided that it would regulate and reduce the bride price.¹⁴² The next year's State Assembly indeed came back to the matter, condemning the exorbitant bride price that was asked in the Igbo area. However,

¹³⁶ Ahanotu, 'The role of ethnic unions' 159.

¹³⁷ NAE: OGPROF 2/1/2509 Minutes of the Ibo State Assembly held at port Harcourt, 17 and 18 December 1955.

¹³⁸ *West African Pilot* 30 August 1951; *Daily Times* 2 May 1951.

¹³⁹ *West African Pilot* 6 March 1950.

¹⁴⁰ *West African Pilot* 2 March 1950; PRO: CO 957 7 Minutes of the annual conference of Asaba Union held on the 25th and 26th of December, 1950, at the Native Court Hall.

¹⁴¹ 'Ibo State Meets: Branches Complain Of Sufferings', *West African Pilot* 9 March 1950.

¹⁴² 'Ibo State Assembly decides to probe into high bridal price', *West African Pilot* 2 March 1950.

rather than regulating and reducing the price, the Assembly left it to towns and villages to each individually discuss the matter and decide on a moderate price.¹⁴³

The result of the discussion on the bride price issue illustrates the fact that, despite its goal of unifying the Igbo and acting as the group's highest authority, the Ibo State Union had to accept that the different branch unions—and the towns they represented—did very much as they pleased. This relative failure of the Igbo State Union has been explained by Igbo nationalists as characteristic of Igbo identity. In their opinion, the loose organizational structure of the Igbo unions reflected the decentralized political system of Igbo traditional society. Austin Ahanotu, for example, while discussing the State Union, claimed that 'The loose connection between one level of ethnic unions and the all-embracing Ibo State Union demonstrated Igbo character.'¹⁴⁴ The importance of the Ibo State Union and its State Assemblies lies therefore not so much in the actual organizing of the Igbo, or the implementing of a common policy; the Union was not particularly successful in either respect. Rather, the Union was important for initiating debates about aspects of Igbo culture, providing a forum for discussing Igbo identity as well as an infrastructure for disseminating the—often contradictory—outcomes of these debates.

Another matter discussed during the State Assemblies was that of a standard orthography for the Igbo language. This despite the fact that the Ibo State Assemblies were conducted (and minuted) in English, and that even those delegates proposing to conduct the meetings in Igbo did not succeed in participating in the debate without dropping in the occasional English word, to the amusement of all.¹⁴⁵ The orthography question was discussed several times, and the Union decided to support the old, mission orthography, rather than the new one advocated by the Colonial Government's Education Department.¹⁴⁶ This standpoint not only had to be communicated to the Education Department as the Union's official position, it also had to be conveyed to SPILC, more particularly to Ogbalu who, after a period of strong support for the old orthography, had come to support a compromise orthography. The meeting of December 1955 therefore decided that 'Mr Ogbalu - a graduate teacher at St. Augustine's College Nkwerre should be written and advised to desist from conducting lectures from School to School on any other orthography than the Old one acceptable to the Ibo State'.¹⁴⁷ The assemblies made other attempts as well to define what 'is' Igbo. One such project was the attempt to collect various Igbo customary laws which would then be blended into a single charter by a body of seven Igbo lawyers.¹⁴⁸ Another was the booklet *Pointers to the Ibo's Past* by B. O. N. Eluwa,¹⁴⁹ the State Union's Under-Secretary. The Assemblies furthermore

¹⁴³ 'Fifth Assembly told that Ibo State College will be opened in month of January 1952', *West African Pilot* 30 August 1951.

¹⁴⁴ Ahanotu, 'The role of ethnic unions' 158.

¹⁴⁵ *West African Pilot* 9 March 1950; *Daily Times* 2 May 1951.

¹⁴⁶ *West African Pilot* 25 July 1955; NAE; OGPROF 2/1/2509 Minutes of the Ibo State Assembly held at Port Harcourt, 17 and 18 December 1955.

¹⁴⁷ NAE; OGPROF 2/1/2509 Minutes of the Ibo State Assembly held at Port Harcourt, 17 and 18 December 1955. I do not know why the assembly refers to Ogbalu as 'a graduate teacher' rather than as secretary of SPILC. It may be that those present at the meeting were not familiar with the activities of SPILC, but it is also possible that the State Union perceived SPILC as competition and therefore ignored its existence on purpose.

¹⁴⁸ NAE; ONDIST 12/1/2094 Minutes of the first Ibo State Assembly 25-26 June, 1949.

¹⁴⁹ *West African Pilot* 6 May 1950.

attempted to define what Igbo culture would be like in the future by discussing issues such as the design of an Igbo national dress, as well as the need for the Igbo to become the best educated group in Nigeria.¹⁵⁰

Celebrating Igbo-ness

The Ibo State Union provided not merely a forum for discussing Igbo culture, it also made deliberate attempts to promote Igbo culture. From 1954 until its proscription in 1966, the Union organized an annual Ibo National Day that was observed in towns in the Igbo area as well as in cities with Igbo migrant populations all over Nigeria and Cameroon.¹⁵¹ Initially, the event was celebrated on the first Saturday of October, but around that date rain tended to disturb the festivities, which caused great concern and suspicion among Igbo leaders. It was argued, for example, that the very heavy rain that disturbed the 1956 celebrations in Calabar had been caused by the COR State Movement in order 'just to mar Ibo function' (the Igbo are thought to have retaliated by causing rain to spoil a November rally from the COR State Movement).¹⁵² Ibo Day was later re-scheduled for early December.¹⁵³

According to the *Programme* of the 1963 celebrations, Ibo National Day was intended as 'a special day, initiated and established by the Ibos, for rest, jubilation and thankfulness to God'.¹⁵⁴ The day served different purposes. Through the staging of mass rallies with Igbo music and dance, it helped to unify the Igbo as a group around a set of symbols relating to a shared Igbo past and a common culture. This was reflected in the stated aim of contributing to a greater appreciation of Igbo cultural heritage. However, the day was also and explicitly directed towards the future. The Ibo Day speeches made it clear that the Igbo group had shared interests as well as a common purpose, which could be realized under the leadership of the Ibo State Union. This aspect was presented as 'reflection on the life of modern Igbo in the context of the Nigerian developments, in peace and unity'.¹⁵⁵ It was clear to the Union, that in the context of modern Nigeria, the Igbo needed education, unity, and a body to voice the concerns and interests of the Igbo group: the State Union. However, money was needed for all these activities, and from the very beginning Ibo National Day was exploited as an occasion for fund-raising for the Education Scheme and for the State Union in general. While the publicity

¹⁵⁰ NAE; OGPROF 2/1/2509 Minutes of the Ibo State Assembly held at Port Harcourt 17-18 December 1955; *West African Pilot* 30 August 1951.

¹⁵¹ The decision to institute Ibo Day had been taken at the June 1954 Ibo State Assembly at Aba. NAE; OGPROF 2/1/2509 Minutes of the Ibo State Assembly held in Port Harcourt, 17-18 December 1955; see also: *West African Pilot* 14 September 1954.

¹⁵² A. Bassey, *Ibo State Union Boycott Order of 7th November 1956* (Calabar n.d.) 16. The COR State Movement was a political pressure group of non-Igbo minorities, which advocated the division of the then Eastern Region into two states: the one made up of the provinces where the Igbo were predominant, the other consisting of the provinces Calabar, Ogoja and Rivers (hence 'COR') that were predominantly non-Igbo. Uchendu has argued that rain making (by a *dibia miri*) is a common instrument of hostility among rival Igbo village-groups holding their market sessions on the same day (V. C. Uchendu, *The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria* (New York 1965) 28).

¹⁵³ Anene, An aspect of Igbo history, 31.

¹⁵⁴ Ahanotu, 'The role of ethnic unions' 162 (quoting the *Programme of the Ibo Day celebrations 7-12-1963*).

¹⁵⁵ NAE; OGPROF 2/1/2509 Minutes of the Ibo State Assembly held in Port Harcourt, 17-18 December 1955.

in the newspapers stressed the cultural and social importance of the National Day celebrations, it was the financial side of things that received most attention in the Union's reports and the circular letters to the branches. The circular letters not only suggested how to raise funds, but also reminded the branches that they had to send the net proceeds to the Ibo State Union Headquarters within a fortnight after the celebration.¹⁵⁶

While the Igbo unions in the different towns were free to make their own arrangements (even to the extent that Igbo residing in Lagos celebrated Ibo Day one week later than the other Igbo¹⁵⁷), the National Day celebrations all across Nigeria showed a similar pattern:¹⁵⁸ Following instructions from the State Union's Executive, the local unions declared that Ibo Day was a local holiday for all Igbo who were not employed in the civil service or in commercial firms and that there would be no marketing or shopping.¹⁵⁹ Local buses and taxis were exempt from this, as these were needed to transport the people to the site where the day was celebrated. Following a Christian prayer and the traditional breaking of the kola nut, the festivities were opened by the president of the local town union reading out the Igbo Day Message from the President of the Ibo State Union. This presidential address was followed by long speeches from local Igbo leaders. One common theme was the unity of the Igbo and the need to preserve that unity wherever the Igbo might be, because *Igwe bu ike* ('unity is strength').¹⁶⁰ Other important themes included the common origin and destiny of the Igbo,¹⁶¹ the future of abundant peace and prosperity to all Igbo, and the need for Igbo to maintain peaceful co-existence with other Nigerian groups. To help maintain the peace, the president of the State Union in his 1955 presidential address explicitly warned the Igbo not to seek to dominate anybody, and to behave orderly and peacefully.¹⁶²

¹⁵⁶ NAE; ONDIST 12/1/1667 Circular D. K. Onwenu to branches, Ibo State Union, 13 August 1955.

¹⁵⁷ 'Ibos in Lagos to mark National Day on Oct. 8', *West African Pilot* 1 October 1955.

¹⁵⁸ NAE; ONDIST 12/1/1667 Circular D. K. Onwenu to branches, Ibo State Union, 13 August 1955.

¹⁵⁹ *West African Pilot* 14 September 1954.

¹⁶⁰ *West African Pilot* 11 October 1954.

¹⁶¹ *West African Pilot* 20 October 1954.

¹⁶² 'Ibos told to maintain peaceful co-existence with other tribes', *West African Pilot* 5 October 1955.

After these rather serious matters, the celebration of Igbo-ness continued with dances and masquerades. In many places, the local Igbo unions made their own additions to the general programme. For example, in Kurra Falls in 1954, the Igbo youths went round the town singing Igbo songs,¹⁶³ while in Idah a procession was held of Igbo dressed in what was described as 'native attire' chanting Igbo songs.¹⁶⁴ In Shendam, a group photograph was taken of all the Igbo resident in that town.¹⁶⁵ In the larger cities, the festivities also included film shows, official State Union dinner parties and ballroom dances.¹⁶⁶ The sale of tickets for these occasions were, of course, part of the project of fund-raising. Other ways in which money was raised included public pledges during the rallies, door-to-door collections and, in 1955, the sale of the Ibo National Button which pictured an elephant as the emblem of the Ibo State Union.¹⁶⁷

The Igbo dances and masquerades staged in each place received the most attention due to their role as shared emblems of Igbo-ness, but were also staged for sheer pleasure. In Lagos the masquerades were usually staged at the Yaba Stadium. Reporting on the 1954 Ibo Day celebrations, the *West African Pilot* noted that in spite of heavy rain, 'hundreds of spectators thronged the Yaba Stadium to watch the variety of colourful Ibo dances and plays'.¹⁶⁸ This observation is followed by a review of the different dances that were performed as well as their impact upon the audience. It is noted that the liveliness of the Ogulugu Atilogu masquerade not only won it a long applause, but also that 'the rhythm was so impelling that more than half of the spectators danced all along without knowing it'. The Awka Women dancers thrilled the crowd with their graceful movements, while through the Onitsha Women's dance 'the public was treated to the simple grace of feminine demonstration of rhythm and singing'. On the other hand, the liveliness of the male Eziagu Atilogu dance that ended this celebration of Igbo-ness was extolled as being 'Germanic' and 'not fit for mere mortals'.

The way in which masquerades were employed during the Ibo Day celebrations, shows how masquerades, which in the villages in the Igbo area had an important function as representations of the local community, came to be recognized as emblems of the wider Igbo ethnic group. In a process similar to that which has been described for Igbo music in the urban context, the relationship between the masquerade and the audience changed. The direct interaction between the masquerade and the community, expressed in such actions as people teasing the masquerade or the masquerade criticizing community affairs or individual actions, was lost in the Ibo Day masquerades. The audience in the stadium was made up of individuals from communities from different parts of the Igbo area, and was thus unable to fully appreciate the original, local meaning of the essentially local masquerade that was performed in front of them. Some members of the audience 'read' the masquerade better than others; or, in other words, there were different interpretations of the masquerade among the audience. Next to

¹⁶³ *West African Pilot* 11 October 1954.

¹⁶⁴ *West African Pilot* 20 October 1954.

¹⁶⁵ *West African Pilot* 27 October 1954.

¹⁶⁶ *West African Pilot* 14 and 30 September 1954, 1 October 1955.

¹⁶⁷ Unfortunately for the Ibo State Union, not only did they not succeed in distributing all the buttons in time (leaving some 14,000 buttons undistributed), the elephant was also the emblem of the Benin Delta People's Party which was in alliance with the Action Group against the NCNC. NAE; OGPROF 2/1/2509 Minutes of the Ibo State Assembly held at Port Harcourt 17-18 December 1955.

¹⁶⁸ 'Variety of dances mark Lagos Ibo National Day celebration', *West African Pilot* 11 October 1954.

these individual meanings, the masquerade acquired added significance as an emblem of Igbo-ness, different from British colonial culture as well as from the masquerades of other ethnic groups.

This process is equally visible in other masquerades performed outside the local context, such as the 'native dances' performed as part of the colonial administration's Festival of the Arts, the masquerades staged by the Voluntary Arts Council,¹⁶⁹ and the performance of the Atilogwu masquerade at the 1964 World Fair in New York. Led by the former Culture Officer of the State Union, this overseas performance generated huge interest among Igbo throughout Nigeria.

A contrast to these organized performances was provided by the masquerades that emerged spontaneously in the Nigerian urban centres. For example, in the commercial town Aba in the early 1950s many different kinds of masquerades, each with its own band of followers, roamed the streets on Christmas day and Boxing day. The masquerades came from different parts of the Igbo area, but also from other groups such as Efik and Ibibio. People from many different parts joined in the game of teasing the *Ojonnu* masquerades that originally came from Arondizogu. The *Ojonnus* were clad in coarse black cloth and wore a small wooden head-mask representing a bird. They carried a palm frond which they used to chase and whip people in the streets. Not only did many non-Arondizogu people participate in the game, even staging their own *Ojonnus*, the highlight of the festivities was the fight between the *Ojonnus* and the Cowboys, the latter being a masquerade usually staged by youths whose parents had come from Sierra Leone or Fernando Po.¹⁷⁰ Of course the masquerades and dances that were staged to celebrate Ibo Day went one step further in that they explicitly linked these expressions of culture to Igbo-ness.

¹⁶⁹ NAE; MINED 8/1/260 Memorandum from a British Council discussion group which met at the British Council House, Enugu, 18 March 1954, to discuss the recently ended Regional Festival of the Arts.

¹⁷⁰ Ola Balogun, 'Christmas at Aba in the early 1950's', *Nigeria Magazine* 101 (1969) 436-443, *passim*.

8.3 Politics, culture and Igbo-ness

The Ibo Day celebrations and other activities organized by the State Union illustrate that in the process of promoting Igbo identity, culture is closely interwoven with politics, both national and local. On a local level, apart from celebrating Igbo culture and collecting funds for the State Union, the Ibo Day celebrations served as an opportunity for the local Igbo leadership—and those who merely claimed such a position—to assert themselves. While men, women and school children were expected to take part, the ceremony had to be led by chiefs, titled elders, honourable members of the Ibo State Union, professionals, and businessmen and -women.¹⁷¹ The make-up of this list of notables reflects the claim to prominence of the businessmen who made up the leadership of the Ibo State Union.¹⁷² As has been described above, the young businessmen's efforts to become prominent in the Ibo State Union and the local unions reflected their perception of these bodies as a road to power and influence. The businessmen in the Ibo State Union were very positive about business, describing it—like Azikiwe did in his newspapers—as not only profitable but also morally desirable. They also portrayed their private business ventures as 'development projects'.¹⁷³ Efforts to promote Igbo culture by the Ibo State Union, and other unions, were thus linked to political claims and claims to respectability for the Igbo and their leaders. The Ibo State Union tried to prove that the Igbo were not primitive. They also attempted to repudiate suggestions that the Igbo intended to dominate Nigeria, emphasizing the need for peaceful co-existence of the Igbo with their neighbours and respect for the traditions and culture of the people among whom Igbo migrants were living.¹⁷⁴

The denial of accusations of Igbo domination refers to the levels of regional and national politics, where the development and functioning of party politics during the period 1944 to 1966 produced many accusations of tribalism by political leaders, as well as political demands voiced in ethnic terms. One of the most salient features of this was of course the fear of Igbo domination voiced by the NCNC's political opponents inside and outside of the Eastern Region. I have mentioned in chapters 3 and 7 that NCNC leaders tried to refute this fear, attributing it to the tribalistic attitude of their opponents, and that this position was supported by the *West African Pilot*. However, the credibility of the NCNC leaders' claim to be non-tribalistic suffered from the fact that many of them were active in the Ibo State Union. The most visible example was of course Azikiwe himself, until his resignation as President of the Ibo State Union in 1952. His successor, Z. C. Obi, a businessman who led the Union until it was proscribed in 1966, was president of the Port Harcourt branch of the NCNC.¹⁷⁵ Another case was that of the Union's Cultural Adviser, Ozuomba Mbadiwe, an NCNC politician who was regarded as a possible successor to Azikiwe as Premier of the Eastern Region during the

¹⁷¹ NAE; ONDIST 12/1/1667 Circular D. K. Onwenu to Ibo State Union branches, Port Harcourt, 13 August 1955.

¹⁷² Ota, *Ethnic nationalism in Nigeria*, 143-145.

¹⁷³ Which is of course not really different from what the colonial government (and later independent governments and NGOs) did when they introduced development projects involving mining, palm oil production, or steel production.

¹⁷⁴ Anene, *An aspect of Igbo history*, 32.

¹⁷⁵ Nyakno Oso, ed., *Newswatch Who's Who in Nigeria* (Lagos 1990) 513.

1950s.¹⁷⁶ These personal links between the two organizations are not surprising since, as we have seen, the State Union had been founded to support NCNC policy and as such had a political aim. This changed in the early 1950s, when the State Union began to define itself as a cultural, rather than a political, organization. Nevertheless, it continued to support the NCNC throughout its existence.

How essential this support was, is another matter. While the State Union provided opportunities for NCNC propaganda during the State Assemblies and the Ibo Day celebrations, it was not in a position to force its member unions or individual members to vote for the NCNC (most Igbo nevertheless did vote for the NCNC). Also, the number of unions that actually took up membership remained low throughout the State Union's existence. On the other hand, the NCNC did not create an effective party-organization in the Eastern Region and rarely met except before and during elections. Rather than create its own local branches, the NCNC relied on the loyalty of the different town and district unions.¹⁷⁷ Not only did it rely on the organizational structure of the unions for election and other propaganda, in many instances it also allowed the unions to recruit the local NCNC candidate. After the candidate had been elected, it was the local town union, rather than the party, that acted as mediator between the community and its NCNC representative.¹⁷⁸ In other cases, political communication was not dominated to such an extent by the local union, but in these situations as well, the elected representative, the NCNC, the local union and the Ibo State Union remained closely linked through the overlap in membership and a shared ethnic orientation. Therefore, rather than the NCNC depending on the State Union, both organizations attempted to influence and gain the support of the local Igbo unions. Although the two organizations had different goals and were therefore not competing directly with each other, the NCNC proved much more successful in achieving support from local unions than the State Union, essentially because it had more political clout and hence more to offer in the sphere of amenities. In the words of NCNC candidate M. I. Okpara (whose election campaigns were so successful that he succeeded Azikiwe as Premier of the Eastern Region)¹⁷⁹: 'If you vote for me, I will vote for you'.¹⁸⁰

The impact of the Ibo State Union

It will be clear that the political aim of the State Union's leaders, who depicted the Union as the spokesman, defender and arbiter of the Igbo people, was never fully realized. The size of staff and leadership was small, which limited the number of projects that could be initiated.¹⁸¹ Apart from that, the limited political impact of the union can be explained by its internal politics. The resignation in 1954 of a number of NCNC politicians from the leadership in order to dispel the

¹⁷⁶ Offodile, *Dr. M. I. Okpara* 36.

¹⁷⁷ Smock, 'The NCNC and ethnic Unions in Biafra' 24, 30-32.

¹⁷⁸ Smock, *Ibo Politics* 162.

¹⁷⁹ In 1959, Azikiwe resigned as Premier of the Eastern Region to become Governor-General of Nigeria (and later the country's first President).

¹⁸⁰ Offodile, *Dr. M. I. Okpara* 49.

¹⁸¹ Smock, *Ibo Politics* 169.

notion that the NCNC was an Igbo party, led to a period of internal personality clashes and misunderstandings. The remaining leadership consisted mainly of businessmen with little education led by Z. C. Obi, a former U.A.C. clerk who had started his own business. Besides the businessmen, there was a smaller group of better educated officials. While State Union President Obi deliberately reduced the national political involvement of the Union, the educated officials wanted the Union to be more active, politically as well as culturally, and raise its public profile. However, the Obi-led business faction interpreted these aspirations as those of emergent political entrepreneurs who merely wanted to use the State Union as a platform for their own personal political ambitions.¹⁸² Thus in the analysis of the Obi-led faction, the educated officers were not at all different from themselves, thereby constituting a possible threat to their influence. This view was probably correct, but the policy of frustrating the educated officers that was instituted as a result seriously hampered the functioning of the union, resulting in the resignation of founding member B. O. N. Eluwa as Permanent Under-Secretary. It has been argued that Z. C. Obi and his deputy V. C. Anene, another local businessman, transformed the State Union into Obi's personal property by co-opting a large number of under-educated businessmen into the Executive Committee, by keeping the Union's minutes books and records at Obi's home rather than at the secretariat, and by refusing to call regular sessions of the Executive.¹⁸³ The State Union was less active after 1954 than it had been before, limiting itself to cultural activities and the Ibo Day celebrations. Obi resisted attempts to organize new, political, activities for fear that he would lose his control. The Ibo State Union became more politically involved again only during the 1960s. This involvement was usually defensive, for example denying newspaper articles claiming that the Ibo State Union controlled the NCNC and that Igbo monopolized federal posts. The union also reacted to attacks on and discrimination against Igbo. In 1965, for example, the Ibo State Union send a delegation to premier Balewa to ask him to use his influence to stop the attacks on Igbo in the North and West, and to return to the Igbo those possessions and jobs that had been taken away from them.¹⁸⁴

The Ibo State Union, on the whole, had a more cultural than political impact. Indeed, as I have mentioned above, it actively tried to promote Igbo culture and attempted to organize people around a shared Igbo identity. While many of these attempts seem to have been rather half-hearted, or never to have survived beyond the stage of good intentions, the Union made at least some impact upon the popular imagination of Igbo identity, especially in the urban areas. Furthermore, the Union's leaders toured the Igbo area and the cities with an Igbo population to promote the State Union's activities and advocate membership.¹⁸⁵ These tours and the other publicity activities did not result in a large membership, and when town unions affiliated to the State Union this did not change the fact that their first loyalty was to the town or village, and not to the larger Igbo group. Despite this rather limited success in uniting the Igbo in its own organization, it did increase an awareness of Igbo identity, even—albeit to a lesser degree—in

¹⁸² Ota, *Ethnic nationalism in Nigeria*, 145-146.

¹⁸³ *Ibidem* 143-144.

¹⁸⁴ Smock, *Ibo Politics* 171-172.

¹⁸⁵ 'Ibo State Union tour "to educate"', *Daily Times* 24 April 1951.

the rural communities.

Ibo State Union and SPILC

To end this chapter, I will briefly compare the two Igbo organizations that actively promoted Igbo culture. It will be clear from the discussion in chapter 7 that these organizations cannot be credited with determining the shape and spread of the awareness of a shared Igbo identity. Furthermore, while important to the Igbo cause, in the wider Nigerian context these bodies were not exceptional. Both organizations developed during the late 1940s in the context of debates about the development of Nigerian party politics, as well as the problems and prospects of life in the colonial multi-ethnic state. They drew on ideas about the characteristics of different ethnic groups that were formulated in the urban setting, as well as on a debate that contrasted Igbo tradition and modernity. All these developments had an independent impact upon perceptions of Igbo identity, irrespective of the efforts of the two bodies. However, the two organizations were important as the principal representatives of the two main areas, outside the arena of party politics, where Igbo language and culture were promoted: SPILC representing the field of education and learning, and the Ibo State Union the cultural activities of the many Igbo unions.

Although the aims of the two organizations were essentially different, the Ibo State Union and SPILC had much in common. For a start, both had close personal links to the NCNC political party. Also, both cultural organizations had emerged in order to achieve political aims. In the case of SPILC, this was the limited aim of defending the old Igbo orthography against the proposed new orthography. In the case of the State Union, the body had been founded to support and implement the NCNC's constitutional proposals. In both cases, they were active mainly as cultural rather than political organizations. Given the fact that these organizations had political aims, it is not surprising that they promoted their cultural claims against other groups or organizations. This is of course fairly common: the British promoted Igbo language in an attempt to keep them from becoming black Englishmen and dismissed the Western educated Igbo elite as 'detribalized' and therefore not representative of true—that is: village—Igbo opinion. SPILC promoted Igbo language against the British, while the Ibo State Union promoted Igbo language and culture against both the British and other Nigerian groups. All shared the definition of Igbo culture as part of a contrast between modernity (the colonial state, English, the city) and tradition, represented by Igbo village culture.

SPILC and the State Union were organized in similar fashion: both had a central body and a number of branches to represent the organization in different places within Nigeria. Furthermore, each has been dismissed as an organization which failed to achieve its ends. At the same time, however, both bodies can be shown to have had an impact upon ideas of Igbo-ness and being Igbo in general, and upon the promoting of Igbo culture. This impact was realized less through the rather limited membership than through the publicity surrounding their existence and activities. In both cases the type of activities organized depended mainly upon the actions of one individual. In the case of the Ibo State Union, its formation was largely

initiated by B. O. N. Eluwa, who previously had been the president of the Ibo Federal Union, and remained in an influential position until 1954. However, most of the Union's early policies and activities reflected the interests of its first president Azikiwe, who steered a very political course between 1948 and 1952, emphasizing the need for an autonomous Igbo state. By contributing his already considerable political weight, his personal charisma and newspaper-coverage to the State Union, Azikiwe not only managed to bring the State Union to the attention of a considerable group of Igbo politicians, intellectuals and businessmen, but also helped to create a strong image of the Union for the outside world. The impact of his successor Z. C. Obi, who remained the leader of the State Union until 1966, was rather the reverse. While Obi purposely tried to stay clear from national politics, he did of course not shy away from internal State Union politics. As we have seen, Obi controlled the membership of the Executive Committee and decided almost singlehandedly on State Union policy. The public image of the State Union changed as a consequence of the fact that Obi and his close associates were businessmen. The group led by Obi did not have the same popular prestige as Azikiwe and other members of the NCNC leadership, and indeed sections of the Igbo elite actually looked down upon the State Union's leadership.¹⁸⁶ SPILC was to an even greater extent shaped and led by one person. F. C. Ogbalu was not only one of the founders of the society, he led it until his death in 1990 and decided on its policy. Indeed, as I have mentioned above, it was often argued that SPILC and Ogbalu were one and the same.¹⁸⁷

The examples of Azikiwe, Obi and Ogbalu illustrate that promoting culture was always linked to politics, at least at the level of the individual; it will be remembered that Ogbalu, running for the NCNC, was elected as representative for his town, while the 'non-political' Obi in fact became a senator.¹⁸⁸ All three of them were also businessmen, thereby linking Igbo culture to both politics and business. The specific impact of the activities of these individuals shows that in order to explain the promotion of Igbo identity, it does not suffice to point to the older debates on Igbo culture, the changing social relations in the colonial state, and the logic of the emergent Nigerian political system.

However, these individuals could shape the outcome of the debate on Igbo language and culture only to a limited extent, as each of them related his understanding of Igbo culture to existing debates in the missions or the colonial administration. Azikiwe, for instance, drew heavily upon the colonial perception of the Igbo, attacking it and inverting it, but ultimately using many of its core notions, including the perception of the Igbo as 'inherently democratic'. All three men were furthermore the product of mission education and were aware not only of the missionary view of the Igbo, but also of the missionary position on matters relating to Igbo culture, including the choice of orthography and a standard dialect. Would similar organizations with similar definitions of Igbo culture have developed without the earlier colonial and missionary debates? In other words, was Igbo culture just there to be discovered, or was it actually imagined and shaped in the context of the interaction with government and

¹⁸⁶ Chinua Achebe, *The Trouble with Nigeria* (Enugu 1983) 47; Ota, *Ethnic nationalism in Nigeria*, 145-146.

¹⁸⁷ Emenanjo, 'The Ogbalu factor in Igbo literary history' 35; Interviews with: Igwe Obi, Enugu, 16 November 1995; A. E. Afigbo, Nsukka, 19 November 1995; B. I. N. Osuagwu; Owerri, 30 November 1995; E. N. Emenanjo, Ibusa, 30 December 1995.

¹⁸⁸ Sklar, *Nigerian Political Parties* 205.

missions and also with the other groups in Nigeria? From the previous discussions, it will be clear that I think that without these earlier debates and exchanges, Igbo identity could not have developed as it did. There were enough possible alternative identifications and in fact, all through the period under study, these alternative identities were also mobilized next to a notion of Igbo identity that gained ground with increasing rapidity.