

University of Massachusetts Boston

From the Selected Works of Chukwuma Azuonye

2006

Igbo

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Abu S. Abarry

IGBO

GEOGRAPHY AND HISTORY

The 25 million Igbo people of south-central Nigeria are remarkable for the republican and democratic ethos of their social organization. Dispersed in hundreds of small autonomous confederations of village-groups, each with its own distinctive traditions and culture, the Igbo world offers many intriguing paradoxes in its accommodation of several apparently opposing polarities of ideas. These are actually necessary dualities in keeping with the people's fundamental concept of balance, expressed in the proverb, "*Ife kwulū, ife akwūdebe ya*" (Whatever stands, something else stands beside it). Everything is relative, as another proverb says—framing the same philosophy in terms of a universal democratic ethic: "*Egbe bere, ugo bere, nke si ibe ya ebele, nku kwapū ya*" (Let the kite perch, let the eagle perch; anyone who says that the other should not perch, may its wings break). The finer nuances of Igbo folklore—verbal, customary, and material—can be best understood within this philosophical context.

The etymology of the name *ìgbò* is uncertain. However, given the strong sense in Igbo oral traditions that the core of the Igbo people "sprang from the soil" or that they "have always been here," there is probably a relationship between the name *ìgbò* and the word *gbóó* (literally, "ancient," "aboriginal," or "autochthonous"). Alongside the autochthonous hypothesis now central to the scholarship stand the Oriental and the Niger-Benue confluence hypotheses, which are less widely accepted and are often the subject of intense controversy, debate, and (in the case of the Oriental hypothesis) even ridicule. As the Oriental hypothesis (or, rather, myth) goes, the Igbo are a branch of the ancient Hebrew race who, in the course of the exodus from Egypt, decided (for unknown reasons) to veer southward rather than proceed to Canaan. Far less tendentious but at best only partially complementary to the autochthonous hypothesis is the Niger-Benue confluence hypothesis, which holds that the Igbo people were originally part of a complex of migrants from elsewhere in Africa who first settled in the area around the Niger-Benue confluence,

from which they dispersed to all cardinal points to form the ethnic nations of present-day Nigeria, Chad, Niger, Cameroon, and other surrounding postcolonial states. This hypothesis relies on the strong linguistic and other cultural ties that exist among members of the so-called Kwa family of languages (including Akan, Edo, Ewe, Igbo, and Yoruba) in the forest zone of West Africa and will likely be stiffly challenged (from the perspective of cultural nationalism) by Kwa-speaking scholars of non-Igbo heritage. Nevertheless, it does remind us not only of the close interrelationship between the present-day languages of the Kwa group but also of the many similarities among their verbal, customary, and material folk traditions.

When we correlate the above hypotheses with other evidence, the result is the theory of an autochthonous core of *ndí-gbóó* (aboriginal people) dispersed in the central area of Igboland, who have been joined over the millennia by several waves of immigrants. These patterns of immigration are still recalled in the Igbo oral tradition and have been well documented in Igbo borderland studies. Existing studies have also revealed similar patterns of migration from and into Igboland, giving rise to complex linguistic and cultural syncretisms, which are all reflected in various aspects of Igbo folklore. Interestingly, where scholars see complexity, the Igbo folk imagination sees a simple duality that meshes with its own philosophy of the balance of opposites. This perspective views these sociocultural formations in a simple binary view of the world as two-worlds-in-one—*órú-nà-ìgbò*—made up of a periphery (*órú*) of partly Igbo and non-Igbo peoples on the fringes of the Igbo civilization and a core (*ìgbò*) domain of descendants or affiliates of the aboriginal *ndi-gbóó*.

Among the evidence cited by scholars with regard to the existence of an aboriginal core of *ndí-ìgbò*, out of which the present-day Igbo people are believed to have sprung, is the discovery of a major site of an ancient Achulean culture, dating to 50,000 years ago. To what extent this site relates to the ancient Igbo is a matter for archeological and paleogeographical research. What seems evident from the facts of present-day Igbo verbal usage and associated expressive culture (stories, songs, sayings, and rituals) is the strong probability of an independent evolution in this area of language, lyrical impulse, song, narrative, and ritual.

Basic words, such as *ọkụ* (fire) and *akwụkwọ* (initially “leaves of trees,” later “vegetables,” subsequently “leaves of books,” and ultimately “books and learning”), reveal their roots in simple onomatopoeic monosyllables, such as *kụ* (to knock with a stone) or *kwọ* (to grind with stone). These words seem to hark back respectively to the early method of producing fire by knocking flints together and of processing food by grinding vegetables with stone. Furthermore, a study of the so-called meaningless refrains in Igbo folksongs reveals the strong possibility that the apparently meaningless words of these refrains have meanings associated with their roots. And strongly associated with the migration patterns that dominated the lives of the generations of *ndi-gbóó* who made present-day Igboland their home is the idea of the local settlement as *mbà* or *m-bà* (that which was entered), from the monosyllabic root *-bà* (enter). The reference, in other words, may have been to either an uninhabited land that was entered, possessed, and colonized or an inhabited land that was entered, possessed, and colonized after the original settlers had been displaced.

FOLKTALES AND PROVERBS

With the further development of language, the experience of entry, possession, and settlement of the land found expression in survivalist narratives, which came to be known as *akuko-ala* (tales of the land). These narratives became a complex of myths or ideological mentifacts reminding the people of the struggles of their ancestors in securing the land and of the responsibility of successive generations to defend the land against potential encroachment. In time, a sacred dimension was added to *akuko-ala* with the development of the idea of *ala* not just as contested space but as the source of all human sustenance as well as the eternal bond between the living and the dead buried within it. This sacred dimension developed into the cult of *ala* as the earth goddess (or mother earth). Various Igbo settlements came to see themselves as bound together as a community by *omenala* or *ome n'ala* (that which is done in the land), a system of sacred laws associated with the meaning of the almighty earth-goddess (*Ala*), by whose sacred laws—*iwu-ala* (laws of *Ala*) or *nsọ-ala* (prohibitions of *Ala*)—the Igbo world sees itself as ultimately governed. In the environment of more entrenched social systems, the stability of the fundamental myths has been constantly reinforced and extended by other important structures of the imagination communicated through language, namely *akuko-ifo* (tales of the imagination), *ilu* (similitude), and *okwu-nka* (artistic speech).

Taken together as two sides of the same cultural phenomenon, *akuko-ala* (tales of the land) and *akuko-ifo* (tales of the imagination) represent one of those fundamental dualities in the Igbo conception of the world as an equilibrium of equal and opposed forces. In Chinua Achebe's classic novel *Things Fall Apart*, a male-female duality is infused into the distinction between these two categories of tales. Thus, *akuko-ala* are presented as "men's stories" while *akuko-ifo* are presented as "women's stories." But there is nothing hierarchical in this distinction. Instead, each category of tales defines a domain of valued gender capabilities, which ultimately supports the idea that in Igbo culture, the *oke-na-nne* (male-and-female) duality refers to equal and opposing cultural forces, which must complement one another to maintain societal stability. Thus, as men's stories, *akuko-ala* are ultimately linked to the socially recognized role of the men as champions or defenders of contested space, while as women's stories, *akuko-ifo* comprise tales told by women as custodians of living space and of the ethical upbringing of the younger members of the community and hence of the moral health of the community at large.

The close relationship between *akuko-ifo* and the supergenre of similitude (*ilu*) includes all forms of expression in which there is an explicit or implicit comparison of one thing to another. Chief among these forms is the proverb. Other forms of *ilu* include fables, parables, exempla (concise stories told during a speech act to illustrate the main point of the speech), and allegories. Also included in the domain of *ilu* are folk idioms and analogical figures of speech, such as simile, metaphor, and hyperbole. Furthermore, in some areas of Igbo culture, *ilu* encompasses traditional verbal games, such as tongue-twisters (*okwu-ntuhi*) and riddles (*agwugwa*). In still other areas of the Igbo world, *ilu* is used for all categories of analogical structures of imagination, including *akuko-ifo*, which are viewed as allegories of history or as stories

that use fictional characters (including animals and other non-human actors) to depict generalized aspects of human social life, culture, and history. Thus, in the Igbo trickster cycle, the picaresque hero, Mbe (Tortoise)—in his many wily escapes from the clutches of larger and stronger animals, such as the leopard and the elephant—represents not only the Igbo admiration for the triumph of the intellect over brute force but also the recognition of the human potential to overreach the bounds of reason when intellectual power becomes an instrument for cruelty, exploitation, or even self-destructive folly rather than of personal survival. For example, after collecting a calabash full of wisdom, “wise” Mbe kills himself in the greatest act of folly by falling headlong from the top of a palm tree in order to kill a fly perched on his head. Here again the fundamental duality in Igbo folk philosophy is apparent.

ORATORY AND POETRY

All the categories of verbal expression so far examined are often unified and mobilized for social empowerment in what is decidedly the epitome of Igbo verbal arts, namely *okwu-nka* (artistic speech), or oratory. The Igbo orator is not just an artist (*ọkaa* or *onye-nka-okwu*) or a master of words (*ọka-okwu*) but above all a spokesman for his community (*onye-na-ekwuru-ọha*). Whether they are uttered in public political forums or as private advice, his words represent the best in that selective process of folk memory, which is in accord with the traditional Igbo idea of history as an image of the past that empowers the present.

Equally inspirational and powerful as instruments for historical remembrance are the various forms of Igbo oral poetry that can be categorized into three types: folk-songs (*egwu*), musical poetry (*abu*), and ritual poetry (*okwu-nru*). Igbo folksongs (*egwu-ọha*) encompass the entire life cycle from birth to death. They are generally composed of call-and-response lyrics, performed with or without accompaniment of dance or instrumental music by male or female groups of all ages to celebrate various stages of human life. Maternity songs (*egwu-nnwa*) celebrate the birth of a child; initiation songs (*egwu-abamaba*) recognize the passage from one age grade to another or entry into an exclusive men's or women's association; installation songs (*egwu-echimechi*) mark assumption of one of the elite titles or chiefly orders in the society; and funeral songs (*egwu-akwamozu*) note the end of a life cycle and the transition of the individual from the human world (*uwa*) to the spirit world (*ala-mmụọ*) in a process of reincarnation. Additionally, there are songs for every situation or condition of life: war songs (*egwu-agma*), worksongs (*egwu-ọrụ*), game or play songs (such as moonlight songs) (*egwu-ọnwụ*), praise songs (*egwu-otuto*), satiric songs (*egwu-ikpe*), political songs (*egwu-ndorondoro-ochichi-obodo*), love songs (*egwu-ọkwu*), and a wide variety of other songs associated with various traditional customs and institutions (*egwu-ọdinaala*).

Igbo musical poetry (*abu*) includes chants performed either with or without instrumental accompaniment. Unlike folksong, musical poetry does not use the traditional call-and-response form. Its rather free form basically involves chanting, but for lyrical and other purposes it makes use of other styles, such as singing, reciting, and speaking. The major types recorded and studied so far include invocational,

narrative, dialogic, and didactic forms. The best-documented and extensively studied genres are the elegiac, rhapsodic, and satiric forms.

Invocational in form, elegiac poetry falls into two categories: laments (*mbem*) and dirges (*abu-akwamozu*). Suffused with apostrophe, pathetic fallacy, sparkling similes, metaphors, hyperboles, and oxymorons reflecting on the power of death as well as praise epithets celebrating the dead, the elegy is at times almost indistinguishable in tone from the praise poems or panegyrics recorded and studied extensively among the Egudu. Egudu studies offer two main types of Igbo panegyric verse—praise-poetry addressed to a hero and poetry of self-praise.

Mainly narrative in structure but using the invocative, dialogic, and didactic modes in the exploration of their themes, Igbo rhapsodies (*ugoli*) are the main items in the repertoires of Igbo minstrels, who accompany themselves with *ekpili* (rattles) in their infectiously lighthearted satires on the foibles and follies of people caught in the culture shock of transition from the rural to the urban way of life. But while satire is only one of the many verbal techniques exploited by the Igbo minstrel, a diversity of satiric forms of verse occurs among the *Abigbo* dance groups of the Mbaise Igbo, whose performances are an oral counterpart to the tabloid newspaper. Characterized by its bold smuttiness, hard pornography, gossip, sparkling witticism, whispering scandalous talk, innuendo, and name calling, Igbo satiric poetry not only exposes social deviancy but goes well beyond laughing folly out of existence into the domain of attempting to kill the spirit of the social deviant, thus blurring the distinction between satire and curse.

Igbo ritual poetry (*okwu-nru*) forms part of traditional magical and religious rituals. Almost invariably in the recitation mode but at times transforming into song or chant, this domain of folk verse includes magical incantations, prayers, prophecies, and divination chants. The “Prayer to Ulaasi, River Deity of Ihembosi” and “Prayer to the Death of Creation, Chi-na-Eke” are typical examples of traditional Igbo prayers or supplication. Numerous examples of morning prayer appear in various studies of traditional Igbo religion. “Evil Spirits, Evil Humans” typifies the texture, phraseology, and tone of Igbo traditional curses or maledictions. Igbo chants have been studied within the context of a system of divination (*afa*) that shares numerous archaic elements with the better-known and more carefully documented Yoruba system (*ifa*). The paucity of hymns or praise poems to deities and spirits in Igbo ritual compared to what is found among the Yoruba (for example, the hymns to Eshu, god of fate, or to Ogun, god of war) stems from the Igbo tendency to see their deities more as abstract forces of life than in anthropomorphic terms. In folk medical practices, rainmaking, and other magical rituals, however, Igbo ritualists use words, gestures, and tones comparable to those of their counterparts in Yoruba and other African traditions.

FOLK GESTURE

Igbo customary folklore is classified according to three types of behavior: gesture, dance, and ritual. Contrary to the common assumption, though, folk belief is not limited to superstitions. Beyond superstitions are three other types of folk belief: religious, or faith-based, beliefs; psychic, spiritualist, or paranormal beliefs; and

rational, or scientific, beliefs. Superstitions are unshakeable beliefs founded on the principles of natural or sympathetic magic; religious beliefs are unshakeable convictions in the existence of a deity or deities who created humankind and are ultimately responsible for its destiny; psychic, spiritualist, or paranormal beliefs are unshakeable beliefs in the existence of another world or worlds in which the human spirit may seek repose after death; and rational beliefs are those verifiable by empirical evidence. Aspects of all four types of folk belief appear in the gestures, dances, and rituals that comprise Igbo customary folklore.

Folk gesture ranges from kinetic body language to various nuances of facial expression. Many of these patterns of movement are informed by folk superstition. In this sense, they are forms of magical gesture designed to protect the individual against some calamity, either minor or major. For example, a child who has wandered away from home for a long time would tie a blade of grass (his mother's tongue) to avert rebuke when at last he chooses to go back home.

DANCE

Two types of folk dance—masked and unmasked—are evident in Igbo customary folk tradition. Like European ballet, unmasked Igbo folk dances (*egwu*, or, in con-

tradistinction to other types of folk music, *egwu-ogbugba*) are colorful acrobatic displays choreographed to tell a story through dance movements aided by symbolic costumes. By far the most popular of these traditional dance-dramas are the *Nwokokorogbuo* of Imo State, the *Atijilogwu* of Enugu State, and the *Odenjinji* of Anambra State. In all three types of folk dance, the magic of the acrobatic displays and the alluring beauty of the costumes are placed in a narrative context that suggests that the dances have either been brought to the human world by a spirit visitor or been learned by an adventurer who unexpectedly finds himself in the world of spirits, where he studies the dance movements and the craft of the costumes. Their names often reflect the otherworldly and magical associations of these Igbo dance-dramas. Thus, *Nwokokorogbuo* (*nwa o koro o gbuo*) means “that which can kill if one provokes it” (in other words, a dance that is so enthralling that it will prevent you from doing anything when you ask for it). Similarly, *Atijilogwu* (*a tiji lu ogwu?*) rhetorically asks, “Is there magic in these movements?” while *Odenjinji* (*o de njinji*) describes the dances as “that which shakes” the earth.

More equitably informed by all four types of folk belief (magical, religious, psychic, and rational) are the masked dances (*mmogwu*). In general, this category of Igbo folk dance features masked characters wearing costumes representing various personalities or entities not only in the



An Igbo Maiden Spirit mask, worn by men who mimic activities of women for magical purposes during certain rituals—especially at funerals and festivities. (© Charles Walker/Topfoto/The Image Works)

human and spirit worlds but also in the natural world of plants, animals, and cosmic phenomena. Personalities and other entities in the human world represented by masks range from heroes to social deviants. The masked dance reflects the world as it is experienced by the folk imagination with all its beauty and foibles, both for praise and for censure. Masks representing personalities and other entities from the spirit world include the duality of ancestral and evil spirits. Everywhere in Igboland, masked performances of a special type reenact the periodic return of the spirit of the ancestors to recharge the life force of the society. Typical examples are the *Omabe* among the Nsukka Igbo of Enugu State, and the *Egwugwu* (cognate with the Yoruba *Egungun*) among the Idemilil Igbo of Anambra State. While some masks represent the good ancestral spirits, others represent the various shades and faces of the dreaded evil spirits of those believed to have died bad deaths, which put them forever at odds with their age-mates. When such masks appear as a reminder of the reality of such diabolical principalities and powers, everyone must clear the road and hide in as secure a nook as possible. Masks representing the phenomena of nature are reenactments of the behavior of animals, plants, wind, water, and cosmic objects as observed by the folk imagination. Thus, in the movements of the *Ojiogu* mask (with headgear shaped like a hawk's beak and a costume with sleeves like the wings of the hawk), we witness the predatory dive of the bird at chickens when the masked dancer pursues celebrants with whips during festivities. While the idea behind the masks are generally magical, religious, or psychic, the physical mask, costumes, headgear, and special effects that make the supernatural mimesis possible are invariably the product of rational folk science and technology. The epitome of these special effects will be found in the architectural splendor of the king of masks, *Ijele*—a magnificent mask that in various Igbo communities appears only once every twenty-five to fifty years and that represents the summation of the cultural attainments and experiences of the people in the years since its last appearance.

RITUALS

Igbo folk beliefs also find expression not only in the rites of everyday life but in the various rites of passage that mark the progression of the individual from one age-grade to another in his or her earthly life cycle, and in the major seasonal rituals or celebrations that are the key landmarks in the traditional thirteen-moon (each of twenty-eight days) calendar. The rites of everyday life in Igbo culture have already been described as the contexts for ritual poetry and folk magic. In addition to age-promotion ceremonies, rites of passage include initiations (*abamaba*) into various men's and women's exclusive (so-called secret) societies, and assumptions (*echimechi*) of titles or chiefly orders, such as *nze* or *ozo*. But by far the most elaborate and colorful rituals are the annual calendar rituals, such as the pan-Igbo New Yam Festival (*iri-ji*) or local festivals commemorating the coming of the community's ancestors or the installation of a communal deity. While these festivities may have esthetic elements that suggest they are dramatic performances, most Igbo view traditional rituals—like dances and gestures—primarily as powerful means of transmitting the inherited and shared beliefs of their community from generation to generation.

VILLAGE STRUCTURE AND LAYOUT

The first thing that strikes any visitor to an Igbo village is the orderliness of the physical layout and the constituent compounds, house types, and their architecture. Philip Nsugbe (1974) offers a vivid description of the physical layout of what he terms “the tertiary territorial unit,” or “ward,” in the formerly warlike Igbo community of Ohafia, where a large body of epics has been recorded:

[T]o start with, [it] resembles the sector of a circle, and consists of unbroken rows of huts which run radially from the *ogo* (village-square) towards the bush behind. In between each paired rows of huts lies a path . . . that leads straight into the *ogo*, emptying directly behind the appropriate “rest-hut.” . . . The hind end of the path passes through the bush surrounding the primary unit. The bush separates one territorial unit from the next. . . .

Access is possible from the *ogo* or from the bush end of the unit; it is hardly likely and sometimes impossible from any other direction. This means that once one finds oneself inside the path one becomes effectively trapped, retreat being possible only by continuing in the direction of the *ogo* or by returning towards the bush. It can therefore be imagined that should the need [arise to entrap the visitor, all that would need] to be done would be block the two ends of the path as one would a bridge.

Doors open into the paths between the paired rows of huts. . . . Most primaries in Ohafia are structured this way, with the result that each such unit presents the appearance of a . . . military garrison with the surrounding bush serving as a “moat.” The once essential purpose of this kind of residential structure is effective protection and defense against surprise attack. No foe would find it easy to extricate himself if trapped within such a maze of rows of huts.

The less militarized Igbo villages do not present such an appearance of a military garrison. But almost invariably throughout Igboland, village paths do radiate from the village squares (known elsewhere as *ama* or *ilo*), but they lead into walled compounds dispersed in the surrounding bushes. Each compound, known as *exi-na-ulọ* (compound-and-houses) is the home of the basic social unit—the extended family, consisting of a man of title, his wives, their children, and the children of the eldest son, who will become the head of the family when his father dies. Usually only one gate leads into the compound, and immediately behind this gate is the head of the household’s hut, *obi* (among the Anambra and Edo Igbo) or *obu* (among the Abia, Ebonyi, and Imo Igbo).

In addition to the living space of extended families, much interest has focused on ritual houses such as the *obu* and, more specifically, the *obu-nkwa*—the temple of images among the Cross River Igbo. Perhaps the most widely studied of these temples is the *Omọ-Ukwu* temple of the Ohafia Igbo, which enjoys the status of a national monument under the care of the Nigerian National Antiquities Commission. But despite the fact that most studies of the *Omọ-Ukwu* have revealed highly sophisticated expressionistic, impressionistic, cubistic, or surrealist tendencies in the styles of the wooden images of the heroes depicted there, some scholars insist on pressing the view that these images are far more valued as ritual objects than as art forms,

a judgment that contrasts sharply with the testimonies of local connoisseurs, knowledgeable elders, and custodians of the temple.

ARTS AND CRAFTS

A careful analysis of what the Igbo say about their arts and crafts, whether in the form of drawing, painting, mixed media, pottery, carving, brass casting, jewelry, blacksmithing, weaving, or other textile arts, reveals a balance between functionalist and esthetic judgments, which is in keeping with the overriding philosophy expressed in the proverbs noted earlier. In general, no matter how deeply valued an object may be as a ritual symbol, the degree of virtuosity manifested in the skillful manipulation of form or color in its production is never of secondary interest.

CLOTHING AND FOOD

A similar balance of esthetics and ritual functionalism apparently informs traditional Igbo attitudes to folk costume, including hairstyles, ornaments, and especially the elaborate and highly symbolic tradition of indigo body markings (*uli* or *uri*). The last has influenced a major movement in modern Nigerian art—the *Uli* movement of the Nsukka school—which includes such leading artists as Uche Okeke, Obiora Udechukwu, Ada Udechukwu, Chike Aniakor, El Anatsui, Olu Ogibe, and Tayo Adenaike. Perhaps the sole exception are dreadlocks (*isi dada*), which are invariably prescribed for children believed to be haunted by evil spirits as a way of rendering them unattractive to such dreadful spirits, and which otherwise identify lunatics, who cannot afford to wash or comb their hair.

In the domain of folk cuisine, nutrition and healing seem to have effected a balance. Apart from magical prescriptions, charms, spells, and other control signs that answer to the laws of natural magic and belong to the realm of superstition, a good proportion of Igbo folk medicine (*ogwu*) comprises medicinal foods and beverages or non-dietary herbs, roots, barks of trees, salts, or other mineral prescriptions that the *dibia* (folk doctor) prescribes to be “put into cooked food,” “cooked with food,” or “stored in gin.” A careful study of the medicinal associations of Igbo folk cuisine shows that the magical potions, gestures, charms, and spells on which so much emphasis has been placed by outsiders function merely as placebos and psychological tools in Igbo folk medical practice. Igbo folk medicine is homeopathic and holistic,



An example of one of the elaborate hairstyles practiced by young Igbo women. (General Research & Reference Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations)

and its essence is the use of food and beverages to foster health and to create an environment in which the human body repairs and regenerates its damaged parts.

While the focus here has been on Igbo folklore at the macro (pan-Igbo, national) level, nuances at the micro (local, small group) levels of dialect, gender, class, condition of life, occupation, and other social variables are of equal importance. Among the diverse groups that a closer examination of Igbo folklore would treat are women, men, young adults, children, old men, freemen and slaves, and rulers and the ruled as well as groups defined by many other factors.

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Chukwuma Azuonye

IJO

GEOGRAPHY AND HISTORY

The Ijo-speaking peoples live in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, the largest occupied river delta in the world. This environment has had a profound effect on their culture, but variations in the delta's ecology from one side of the region to the other have encouraged different subsistence patterns and resulted in significantly different forms of political organization. The Central and Western Ijo (pronounced "ee-jaw"), who live to the west of the Nun River, occupy a largely freshwater zone and have primarily supported themselves by farming and fishing. The Eastern Ijo, who settled in a mainly saltwater zone, have always relied heavily on trade with their inland neighbors for agricultural produce. After Europeans arrived at the coast, they played a prominent role in the overseas trade, first in slaves and later in palm oil. Competition for control of lucrative trade routes eventually led to the establishment of a series of Eastern Ijo city-states. In contrast, the Central and Western Ijo remained stateless and had minimal contact with Europeans even during the colonial era.

RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND ART

Ijo living on both sides of the Niger Delta express belief in a female creator. According to a Central Ijo myth, Wonyinghi, or "Our Mother"—who is also known as Ayiba or Teme-arau—descended to earth during a thunderstorm, sat on a large chair, rested her feet on a massive "creating stone," and molded human beings from a huge mound of earth piled on an oversized table. Before birth, people are said to appear before her to tell her what sort of lives they wish to lead. Wonyinghi records what they say in her book, and these "agreements" govern their fortunes on earth. Like most supreme African deities, the creator seldom concerns herself directly with human affairs. However, a number of Central Ijo villages established shrines to appeal to her to prevent epidemics, claiming that people should die one by one, according to their birth agreements, not all at once. The shrines represent her with a staff and stool, items she is only believed to own because she lives so far away that no one has ever seen her.

Different beliefs and practices have evolved among different Ijo subgroups. For example, the Kalabari, an Eastern Ijo group, focus on a triumvirate of supernatural beings that includes the dead, village heroes, and water spirits. The Central and Western Ijo also honor the dead and spirits associated with the environment, but they distinguish between water spirits, who occupy the region's rivers and creeks, and bush or forest spirits, who live on land. The Nembe, an Eastern Ijo group who live between the Kalabari and the Central Ijo, share the latter's beliefs in bush spirits but distinguish between those that live in mangrove swamps and those that inhabit freshwater areas. Considerable variety exists among Ijo art forms as well,