

### *Who are the Igbo? - Searching for Origins*

'The right hand is from Igala, left is Igbo,' said Ibrahim Alleh, whose father is from Igala, while his mother is an Igbo. Ibrahim was introduced to me as a Muslim Igbo. For some time, I had been looking for Igbo who were Islamic, because Christianity is commonly regarded as an Igbo characteristic, and I had become very interested when I heard that a number of Muslim Igbo existed. I decided to try and find out how Igbo Muslims combined an Islamic religious identity with Igbo identity, and also how the Muslim Igbo were perceived by the other, Christian Igbo. However, it turned out that Ibrahim does not consider himself Igbo, although he speaks the language fluently and has some knowledge, through his mother's family, of Igbo festivals and culture. The person who had introduced us was very surprised to learn that Ibrahim did not see himself as an Igbo. Indeed, the expression about the right and left hand, used by Ibrahim, would indicate loyalties to both groups, and the possibility to belong to both. However, Ibrahim told me he could never be a real Igbo, because 'Muslims go not to *Alusi* shrines.'

The above case illustrates that ethnic identity is not determined by birth or ancestry. The individual's ethnic identification leaves room for negotiation and cannot simply be assumed by outsiders. Nevertheless, nowadays it is fairly simple to define at least theoretically who is Igbo: An Igbo is somebody who considers himself Igbo, and who has a link to the area in Southeast Nigeria known as Igboland, either because he himself was born there, or because his family and ancestors came from there. Being Igbo implies being able to speak one of the dialects spoken in the Igbo area (at least more or less), and being familiar with at least part of the traditional cultural norms from that area. If an individual shows himself both unable to speak Igbo and ignorant about traditional culture, his claim to being Igbo is likely to be rejected. On the other hand, as Ibrahim's case illustrates, somebody who speaks Igbo and behaves like one may be accepted as Igbo by others, although he may not regard himself to be Igbo.

A century ago, it was more difficult to define who was Igbo. The boundaries of the Igbo area had not yet been defined, and many people living in the area did not yet regard themselves as Igbo. The idea that all the groups in the area spoke the same language and shared elements of culture among themselves, had not yet taken root. During the course of the century, the boundaries of the area have been decided, and Igbo language and culture have been studied and promoted. Although nationalists and most ordinary Igbo persons tend to refer to language and culture as primordial, language and culture cannot be understood outside their historical context. Therefore, while my main focus in this study is the promoting of Igbo language and culture during the twentieth century, in this chapter and the next I provide the background to this process. In these chapters I show, not only who are the Igbo, but also how a diverse group of peoples have become Igbo over the course of centuries. I examine what is the unity that

binds the Igbo together in their diversity. And also, equally important: I ask who is not Igbo? This process of defining who is Igbo and who is not, has had important social and political consequences, and therefore warrants our attention.

These related questions and issues that make up the problem of 'Who are the Igbo?' can be approached from different directions. A first approach would be to look at the people who used to live in the geographical area now known as 'Igboland', describe what we can reconstruct of their society, and label this as 'pre-colonial Igbo'. This is in fact a search for the historical occurrence of those symbols that define modern Igbo ethnic identity. Referring to the settlement of the area from the Niger-Benue confluence, A. E. Afigbo argued that Igbo culture history spans at least six thousand years.<sup>1</sup> I am not convinced, however, that the mere fact that people used to live in a geographical location that is nowadays accepted as Igbo, is enough to classify these people as 'Igbo'. Elsewhere, Afigbo refers to culture in order to claim that these people should be considered Igbo, because excavated ancient artifacts from that region belong to 'the same line of ethnographic development' as artifacts made by modern Igbo.<sup>2</sup> The anthropologist M. A. Onwuejeogwu has compared aspects of culture for a number of pre-colonial societies in the area, and on that basis defends the existence of a pre-colonial Igbo Culture Area.<sup>3</sup> However, both authors, in stressing the elements of culture that apparently bound together the pre-colonial peoples of the area, downplay the equally significant differences that existed between the groups.

In their approach, both Afigbo and Onwuejeogwu, who are prominent representatives of an influential current in Igbo studies, conform to the culture theory of ethnicity, tracing aspects of culture that are nowadays considered to be Igbo, but unable to prove that the people considered themselves to be Igbo, or even that the described expressions of culture were recognized as Igbo by contemporaries. Nevertheless, Igbo or not, pre-colonial societies served as the basis for later developments, and it is to these societies that the Igbo nationalists refer when they discuss 'traditional Igbo culture'. Many of the symbols of Igbo identity are derived from these pre-colonial societies. For these reasons, a discussion of the pre-colonial societies is important, and this will be my main focus in the first part of this chapter.

After the discussion of the pre-colonial situation in the Igbo area, I will consider ethnonyms. There are two sides to this exercise. The most obvious one is to reconstruct who have been called 'Igbo' in the course of the centuries. In doing so, I seek to explore the relation between the term 'Igbo' as it is used in the past, and the people who are nowadays recognized as 'Igbo'. This is a relevant question, since as recently as the 1950s many Igbo refused to accept the term 'Igbo' as a name for themselves. Tracing when and where people started to define themselves as Igbo, may provide clues as to why and how the diverse communities in

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<sup>1</sup> A. E. Afigbo, 'Prolegomena to the study of the culture history of the Igbo-speaking peoples of Nigeria' in: F. C. Ogbalu and E. N. Emenanjo, eds., *Igbo Language and Culture* (Ibadan 1975) 28-53; there 36.

<sup>2</sup> A. E. Afigbo, *Ropes of Sand. Studies in Igbo History and Culture* (Nsukka 1981) x; This line of arguing used to be fairly common among archaeologists, but this 'pots=people syndrome' has been discredited during the past decades. Nevertheless, archaeologists are still faced by claims to identity based on excavations such as Afigbo's. For a discussion, see: Reinhard Bernbeck and Susan Pollock, 'Ayodhya, archaeology, and identity', *Current Anthropology* (1996) S138-S142; Helen Parkins, 'Archaeology and nationalism: excavating the foundation of identity', *Nations and Nationalism* 3.3 (1997) 451-457.

<sup>3</sup> M. A. Onwuejeogwu, *An Igbo Civilization. Nri Kingdom and Hegemony* (London and Benin City 1981) 16.

the area came to recognize their shared Igbo identity.

The other side of the study of the ethnonym 'Igbo' is to establish what other ethnonyms have been used for the Igbo people, and to which sections of the population these other ethnonyms referred. The relation between these ethnonyms and 'Igbo' could then be discussed. Were these ethnonyms used to indicate groups on a lower level of inclusion than Igbo, or rather as groups different from, or opposed to, the Igbo?

The two aspects that I discuss in the present chapter, the pre-colonial situation and the history of the ethnonym 'Igbo', answer only part of the question of 'who are the Igbo?'. In a sense, this chapter describes the previous history to the emergence of Igbo identity during the twentieth century. It is therefore necessary to also focus on the twentieth century context, that is, on the social and political organization of colonial Nigeria, and especially on the development of a political Igbo nationalism in that context. I will discuss these matters in chapter 3.

## ***2.1 Traditions of origins***

Many authors, in answering the question 'Who are the Igbo?', focused on traditions of origin and migrations. Traditions of origin differ widely throughout the Igbo area; most towns have traditions of migration from a more or less distant homeland, while other towns deny that their ancestors ever migrated from anywhere. However, these local traditions of origin often do not provide a reliable historical source as far as pre-colonial times are concerned.

For a number of communities, we have several versions of their tradition of origin, collected at different times. When these versions of the origin of the same community are compared, significant differences are noted. This is not because the medium, orality, is not reliable, but because these traditions do not discuss the past, but the present. Although traces of historical information may still be present in these traditions,<sup>4</sup> their main purpose is to explain the current social and political situation, providing legitimacy for the claims of the leaders and attempting to organize the relations with neighbouring communities.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, the changing traditions of origin do not indicate unreliability, but the dynamism of the community in which they were collected.

The historian C. N. Ubah has described his experiences when he collected oral sources during the 1970s. In Umololo in Oتانزۇ, he recorded a tradition of origin that claimed that the town had been founded by a man who came from the 'East' beyond the Igbo area. Ubah noted that although the tradition was collected from illiterate elders, the central theme of migration from the East appeared to have derived from educated Igbo circles, where the idea of Igbo eastern origins became popular after being introduced by missionaries at the beginning of the

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<sup>4</sup> Joseph C. Miller, 'Listening for the African past' in: J. C. Miller, ed., *The African Past Speaks: Essays on Oral Tradition and History* (Folkestone 1980) 1-59; Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison, WI 1985).

<sup>5</sup> See for a discussion of this matter for another case: Carola Lentz, "'They must be Dagaba first and any other thing second ...'" The colonial and post-colonial creation of ethnic identities in north-western Ghana', *African Studies* 53.2 (1994) 57-91; there 67-69.

twentieth century. Ubah therefore concluded that:

This tradition of origin appears to be a very recent invention. Early last year a wealthy businessman became the chief of Umulolo and has shown a great deal of interest in matters of local history and culture. One result of this is that a kind of king-maker council now exists and regards itself as the most authoritative body to impart any information on local history and culture. The writer found it impossible to operate outside this body. One naturally suspects that members of this council were provided with official answers to many sensitive questions. Members of this council completely rejected other traditions concerning the origin of their town, including that collected from Umulolo elders half a century ago.<sup>6</sup>

Irrespective of the question whether they are historically correct or not, traditions of origins can still be very important to Igbo identity, as they explain where the community came from, how its membership was (and is) defined, and what are at least some of its basic values. However, all the traditions of origins that have been collected in the area are concerned with the origins of one village or group of villages, not with the Igbo as a group.<sup>7</sup>

In the Igbo area, three different types of traditions of origins can be distinguished. The first claims that the community concerned migrated from an important kingdom outside the Igbo area, such as Benin or Igala. The second claims that the community migrated from a place within the Igbo area, while the last type typically claims that the community migrated from nowhere. Scholars have used these traditions of origin in two different ways: either to come to conclusions as to where the Igbo as a group came from, or to decide on the relative importance of the different groups within the Igbo area.

Onitsha and other communities claim that they descended from Benin, and used to pay tribute to the king of Benin. Other communities in a similar way declare that they descended from the Igala kingdom. Not only Igbo groups, but many other peoples were fascinated by the Benin empire and expressed claims to Benin origin. The virtual universality of this type of claims in Southern Nigeria makes them very suspect as an historical account. Afigbo argued 'That in all likelihood these traditions are fabrications arising from the understandable human craving for identifications with the great or supposedly great as a means of boosting status and image.'<sup>8</sup>

However, confronted with these claims many colonial observers concluded that the Igbo migrated from there, and that their culture was derived from outside the Igbo area. Others did not actually claim that the Igbo as group had migrated, but rather argued that they used to be dominated by an outside force such as the Jukun empire.<sup>9</sup> The study of customs and beliefs even led some colonial theorist to claim that the Igbo were once dominated by Egyptians or Jews.<sup>10</sup> This view has infuriated some Igbo academics, as it was seen as an illustration of the

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<sup>6</sup> C. N. Ubah, *Igbo land in transition 1900-1950. A case study of Otanchara and Otanzu communities*. Special Project, Institute of African Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka (mimeographed [ca. 1978]) 3-4.

<sup>7</sup> See for example John N. Oriji, *Traditions of Igbo Origin* (New York 1990).

<sup>8</sup> A. E. Afigbo, 'Traditions of Igbo origins: a comment', *History in Africa* 10 (1983) 1-11; there 5.

<sup>9</sup> NAE; RIVPROF 8/15/153 H. F. Mathews to Resident, Owerri, 16 February 1928.

<sup>10</sup> NAE; RIVPROF 1/9/1 Memo H. F. Mathews on Aro origins, 11 July 1927. See also: Afigbo, 'Prolegomena to the study of the culture history of the Igbo-speaking peoples of Nigeria' 31.

typical colonial viewpoint that the Igbo were primitive, and that anything good had to be brought in from outside, for instance by the colonizer. By claiming that the Igbo came from elsewhere, anything good in their culture could be attributed to outside influence. In reaction to this line of thought, Igbo academics have stressed that Igbo culture developed autonomously within the area.<sup>11</sup> There are indeed traditions of origin of individual communities which may be used to illustrate this claim, but it is essentially an ideological postulation.

Having discarded the possibility of foreign beginnings, Igbo academics used traditions of Igbo origins to determine where within the area the cradle of Igbo culture could be found, usually perceived quite literally as the place from where Igbo migrated and populated the area. Thus far, they have mentioned different places, such as Aro in the extreme east, and Nri in the northwest of the Igbo area. The northern Igbo plateau has also been mentioned as the 'Igbo heartland', on the grounds that it shows very high population density, that the people's oral traditions and sayings imply the antiquity of the present communities, and also that the communities found there generally do not have migration stories which claimed that they came from far from their immediate environment.<sup>12</sup> It is interesting to note that often authors attempted to find one single centre from where Igbo culture developed. However, the differences in the area, and the many and long-standing contacts with other, non-Igbo communities may indicate that different groups developed and expanded more or less simultaneously, and that only later did these groups become one Igbo group.

The study of local traditions of origin by Igbo and non-Igbo authors in an attempt to trace the origin of the Igbo, represents an important stage in the intellectual definition of what is Igbo. However, I would suggest that these traditions cannot provide us with an answer to the question of where the Igbo came from. Therefore, in this study no attempt is made to trace the origin of the Igbo. Rather, I take the pre-colonial communities existing at the advent of the colonial era as starting-point.

## **2.2 A pre-colonial Igbo identity?**

A partial answer to the question 'Who are the Igbo?' will be provided by the following description of pre-colonial Southeast Nigeria (nowadays regarded as the Igbo ethnic homeland). The Igbo nationalists who set out to promote Igbo language and culture themselves made many references to the 'traditional Igbo societies' of the pre-colonial period: much of the intellectual content of modern Igbo ethnicity is derived from these rural, pre-colonial societies.<sup>13</sup> As an introduction to the discussion of the process of becoming Igbo it is also relevant, because any historical process has at least some of its roots in an earlier past, and is influenced in its functioning by that past.

However, describing pre-colonial Southeast Nigeria is hindered by the lack of reliable historical sources. Although some facts are known, especially regarding the slave trade, and

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<sup>11</sup> J. Okoro Ijoma, 'Igbo origins and migrations', *Uwa ndi Igbo* 2 (1989) 68-74; there 68-70.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, 71.

<sup>13</sup> The Igbo case is not exceptional in this. See: Leroy Vail, 'Introduction: ethnicity in Southern African history' in: Leroy Vail, ed., *The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa* (London 1988) 5.

archeological finds and oral traditions constitute important sources, any reconstruction of the pre-colonial society of the area remains to some extent conjectural. It is not easy to determine whether a certain characteristic was representative for the total population of the area, for a major part of it, or only for the inhabitants of one or a few villages. This is particularly relevant for the interpretation of archeological finds. Furthermore, practically all sources describe the society after the introduction of the Atlantic slave trade. In view of the profound changes that have been documented elsewhere in Africa as resulting from the introduction of the slave trade, we must be very careful when making assumptions about pre-Atlantic slave trade 'Igbo' society.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, there is the problem that every general description of a group of people tends to degenerate into a caricature of that group, while, finally, the differences between the different communities in the area are so striking, that it may not be appropriate to talk about the pre-colonial population of the area as if constituting one group.

Therefore, in this section I do not attempt to define what pre-colonial Igbo society really was, but rather to present a background to the later process of becoming Igbo. First, I will briefly introduce the Igbo area, its landscape and boundaries. After this, I will describe main aspects of pre-colonial society. This description uses Onwuejeogwu's concept of the Igbo Culture Area<sup>15</sup> as its starting point and focuses on those aspects of pre-colonial society that have been identified as 'typically Igbo' by Igbo cultural nationalists and scholars (Igbo as well as expatriates). Based on their publications, this description aims to reflect a commonly shared view. My personal opinion can be found in the last bit of this section, where I will provide a negative answer to the question of whether a pre-colonial Igbo cultural identity existed. While Igbo nationalists, as well as most scholars, tend to stress the continuities within the area, and claim that what is found is uniquely Igbo, I look at the similarities with other West-African groups while I point out that there existed important differences within the Igbo area.

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<sup>14</sup> Jan Vansina argues that 'European histories of Africa have over-stressed the impact of the slave trade on the continent'. Instead, Vansina focuses on the massive influx of foreign goods, the multiplication of foreign trading posts, the growing number of 'explorers,' merchants and missionaries, and the increasingly unequal military and other technologies. In my opinion, the impact of hunting people to sell them as slaves must have been considerable. See: Jan Vansina, 'A past for the future?', *Dalhousie Review* (1992) 8-23; there 15.

<sup>15</sup> M. A. Onwuejeogwu, 'The Igbo Culture Area' in: F. C. Ogbalu and E. N. Emenanjo, eds., *Igbo Language and Culture* (Ibadan 1975) 1-10.

*First impressions*

The territory which is now regarded as 'Igboland' is located in the southeast of Nigeria, covering quite a large area. The distance from north to south is around 250 kilometers, as is the distance from east to west. Unlike the territories of other major Nigerian groups, the Igbo area does not cross international boundaries. It is divided by the Niger, Nigeria's major river: the bulk of Igboland, four-fifths of the area, is located to the east of the river Niger, while one-fifth is situated to the west. The Igbo area has no natural boundaries such as rivers or mountains, its bounds are made up of people: the Igbo area is thought to end where the territory of another ethnic group begins. As a result, the boundaries of the Igbo area can be indicated only by approximation.<sup>16</sup> I suspect that the whole question of the location of the boundaries of the Igbo area only became relevant in the colonial context (but has since remained important), as before 1900 the population knew no distinction between Igbo and non-Igbo communities.<sup>17</sup> During this century, certain sections of the boundary have been the subject of many discussions, claims and counter-claims.

Roughly, the Igbo area is bounded as follows: In the west, the Igbo area is bordered by the Edo people from the Benin area and by a number of smaller ethnic groups. In the south, the Igbo area does not reach the sea, although the region is part of the West-African coastal forest belt. The strip between the Igbo area and the coast, including major parts of the Niger delta, is populated by a number of smaller ethnic groups. While some Igbo claim that this is merely an administrative trick to cheat the Igbo out of sea ports and mineral resources which are rightfully theirs, it is generally accepted that the Igbo area has never included the sea strip. The eastern boundary is constituted by the communities on the Cross River, some of which are very closely related to eastern Igbo groups. To the north, the boundary is formed by the Igala, who, in contrast to the Igbo, are mostly Islamic, and are heavily influenced by cultures from the northern parts of Nigeria.

The Igbo area includes the transition from the coastal rainforest belt to the northern savanna and semi-desert environment. Consequently, the area is rather heterogeneous. One part of it is well-watered by rivers, while other areas are quite arid. It is partly lowland and partly mountainous, partly forested and partly savanna. The region is densely populated by African standards. In 1963, the population density was 208 inhabitants per square kilometer, which was over three times the Nigerian national average for that year.<sup>18</sup> However, major differences in population density exist within the area; certain parts are really very densely populated with sometimes more than 400 inhabitants per square kilometer,<sup>19</sup> while other parts are relatively sparsely populated. A number of major Nigerian cities are located in the Igbo area, the most important being Onitsha, Enugu, Owerri, and Aba. All are densely populated,

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<sup>16</sup> When Onwuejeogwu had to decide upon the boundaries of the Igbo Culture Area, he drew up lists of cultural characteristics which he considered to be typically Igbo. With those lists, he began to examine towns in the Igbo borderland. Every town that was found to possess 50 percent or more of the characteristics in the list, was considered part of the Igbo Culture Area. See: Onwuejeogwu, *Nri Kingdom and Hegemony* 16, note 3.

<sup>17</sup> A. E. Afigbo, *1981 Ahiajoku Lecture* (Owerri 1981) 16.

<sup>18</sup> A. C. Zuidervliet, *Nigeria* (Amsterdam 1982) 27.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem* (figure for 1976).

busy, sprawling cities, which function as major commercial centres. With the exception of Onitsha, they were all created during the colonial period and have since expanded rapidly. In contrast to other parts of Nigeria, the Igbo area has no pre-colonial urban tradition. The majority of the population in the area still live in the villages.<sup>20</sup>

The pre-colonial economical structure was characterized by small scale cultivation of mainly yams and other food crops, but also palm products. As the climate was favourable to the tsetse fly, there was hardly any cattle breeding (only small livestock). The high population pressure on an agrarian economy is often mentioned as an explanation for the fact that many Igbo people have migrated away from the Igbo area. Therefore, the pre-colonial history of the territory has been characterized as a continuing migration away from the 'Igbo heartland'.<sup>21</sup> Along with agriculture, trade has been important for a long time. On the local level, trade was usually conducted by women who sometimes managed to accumulate considerable wealth. At the same time a long-distance trade existed, principally of cattle, slaves, food, salt, and luxury items. Furthermore, a number of specialized communities existed in the area, which concentrated on metallurgical industries, religious rituals, or the administration of justice by means of an oracle.

#### *The Igbo village democracy*

The pre-colonial social and political structure of the area was characterized by small scale units. Until the arrival of the Europeans, the area did not have any cities. In contrast to the North and West of Nigeria, no states existed which controlled large territories. The largest unit of social or political organization was usually the village, or the village group. Notwithstanding the high population density, the inhabitants lived dispersed in villages, which were to a large extent autonomous. As late as 1905 representatives of the Ezza group claimed that the Ezza recognized no superior authority except the Heavens above and the Earth beneath.<sup>22</sup>

However, Onwuejeogwu and a number of other Igbo academics deny this perceived non-existence of influential states. They argue that such a state actually did exist, but was merely not recognized as such by the Europeans who were only familiar with their own, military-political form of rule. The type of religious domination which is claimed to have existed in the pre-colonial Igbo territory was therefore invisible to European observers. In this context

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<sup>20</sup> It may be useful to explain the use of the terms 'village', 'town' and 'city' in the Igbo context, as this differs from the use of these terms elsewhere. While I argue that in pre-colonial times, there were no towns in the Igbo area, there was a tendency for small groups of villages to refer to a common ancestor or migration history, thereby indicating that these villages, although entirely independent of each other, formed a group. These village-groups are often called 'towns', although they do not show urban functions (nowadays some of them, such as Awka, have developed into 'proper' towns fulfilling a range of urban functions, but in most cases, the expression 'Igbo town' still refers to a group of villages). As a result, it is possible to live in a village, while that village is part of a larger unit referred to as town. For example: Umuariam village is part of Obowo 'town'. In this study I use the terms 'village' and 'town' in the Igbo sense (relating to older, rural units), while I use 'city' for the urban centres in the Igbo area and elsewhere in Nigeria.

<sup>21</sup> See for example: Elizabeth Isichei, *A History of the Igbo People* (London 1976).

<sup>22</sup> Afigbo, *1981 Ahiajoku Lecture* 16.

Onwuejeogwu presents the Nri title system as an important connecting force within the area.<sup>23</sup> Later in this same section, I will discuss Onwuejeogwu's concept of Nri hegemony in more detail, here I will merely note that although elements of culture existed which were shared by a larger part of the population in the area, the village was the basis of society.

In most villages, next to the freeborn, there existed groups of cult slaves (Osu), and domestic slaves (Ohu). The Osu were devoted to a shrine and as such fulfilled important ritual functions. The term cult *slave* would seem to imply repression and exploitation. However, this may be misleading. Although the Osu were certainly stigmatized, they were allowed to farm for themselves. And while Osu could not marry a freeborn, they could marry other Osu, and their children would also be Osu. Osu were not sacrificed. When humans were sacrificed, those sacrificed were Ohu, domestic slaves, usually purchased specifically for that purpose. It is not known whether the concept of Ohu already existed before the slave trade, but it is thought that in nearby Benin (Edo) domestic slavery existed for two centuries before the advent of the slave trade.<sup>24</sup> While Ohu were constantly created through capturing strangers, pawning, etcetera, there was also a tendency for Ohu to be re-absorbed into the family (thereby, in time, losing Ohu status). A similar possibility of re-integration did not exist for the Osu.<sup>25</sup>

The population of each village belonged to several clans. The members of one clan tended to live together, constituting their own district within the village. Kinship ties were very important and although both matrilineal and patrilineal definitions of kinship existed in the area, the latter system was the most common: descent was patrilineal, sons settled on their fathers' farms, and women joined their husbands' family after marriage. However, men maintained ties with their mother's clan, which consequently could function as refuge for those whose position within their own clan had become untenable.<sup>26</sup>

The smallest unit in the village was that of the family. One family usually consisted of several households, living together in a walled compound. The house situated nearest to the entrance of the compound was the house of the man who had built the compound. In a semi-circle behind it stood the houses of his women, who each had their own household. It is said that one man could marry as many women as he could afford. However, in general even a very successful man did not have more than two or three wives, due to the high bride price.<sup>27</sup>

This description of the large, complex households constituting traditional village life does of course describe an ideal situation. It does not so much reflect how people actually lived, but

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<sup>23</sup> This is the point Onwuejeogwu argues in *Nri Kingdom and Hegemony*, and which is discussed in some detail below. It is interesting to note that, although Onwuejeogwu argues that the British did not recognize the power of Nri, because they looked at political rather than religious power, his claims about Nri are very similar to those of the colonial officers doing anthropological fieldwork. M. D. W. Jeffreys in his 1931 report did not only describe Nri ritual power over other communities, he also suggested that the Nri/Igbo 'must have been at one time a large Empire'. NAE; RIVPROF 8/15/153 Concise report on the ritual for acquiring the ozo-ship of Aguku (Nri) and of the ozo title in the Awka Division n.d. (1931). See also chapter 6 *infra*.

<sup>24</sup> Peter P. Ekeh, 'Social anthropology and two contrasting uses of tribalism in Africa', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 32.4 (1990) 660-700, there 677 note 12.

<sup>25</sup> NAI; CSO 26 27948. This file, 'The Osu system among the Ibos', contains several Igbo opinions that are directed against a colonial report on 'The social and political organisations in Owerri Divisions'.

<sup>26</sup> Victor C. Uchendu, *The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria* (New York 1965) 38.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*.

rather how people should have lived, had they been ideal villagers. Many, if not most, households differed from the described ideal situation in at least one or more aspects.

Two other important organizations were found in the area: title societies and age grades. These institutions did not always both occur, nor were they found everywhere in the area.<sup>28</sup>

An age grade was made up of all men who had been born in a specified period (usually covering two or three years). In most villages a number of age grades existed, which were often grouped together in a limited number of groups, for example: the younger grades, the middle grades, and the older grades. Members of an age grade were expected to take action together. Often, the members of the older grades held the power in the village, while the middle grades were entrusted with responsible tasks and had to maintain the order in the village. The younger grades carried out manual labour needed by the community as a whole, such as constructing and maintaining paths to the fields, clearing the sources of water supply and cleaning and sweeping market places.<sup>29</sup> Where they existed, the age grades were important social units, creating a bond for life between the members.

Title societies were made up of men—usually, access to title societies was restricted to freeborn males—who had reached a specified age, had paid an entrance fee, and had undergone a ritual. Often, it was possible to buy more than one title, each new title being more exclusive and carrying more prestige. Being a titled man provided status and influence, and also a source of income, as the entrance fees of the new members were divided amongst the older members. It also provided the right to participate in the decision making process regarding important matters affecting the entire community.<sup>30</sup> In many villages, such decisions were taken in the village square, in the presence of all freeborn villagers, who were each entitled to voice their own opinion. In practice, however, the decisions were often prepared by the members of the title societies. The size of the political units and the meetings in the village square provided the basis for the notion of the 'village democracy', which according to many observers characterises Igbo society (this notion is very relevant to Igbo ethnic ideology, as we will see in later chapters). To illustrate the democratic and egalitarian character of the Igbo, the Igbo proverb *Igbo echi eze* ('The Igbo crown no kings') is often quoted. However, in at least some villages in the area, kings did exist in pre-colonial times.<sup>31</sup> In a recent study it was even claimed that the Igbo originally had a hereditary system of chieftaincy, and that the present notion of village democracy was the result of a recent transition.<sup>32</sup> If nothing else, these debates

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<sup>28</sup> NAE; RIVPROF 8/15/153 Concise report on the ritual for acquiring the Ozo-ship of Aguku (Nri) and of Ozo title in the Awka Division n.d. (1931); see also Susan Martin, 'Slaves, Igbo women and palm oil in the nineteenth century' in: Robin Law, ed., *From Slave Trade to 'Legitimate' Commerce. The Commercial Transition in Nineteenth-Century West Africa* (Cambridge 1995) 172-194; there 175.

<sup>29</sup> Age grade systems have been described for the eastern Igbo in: Simon Ottenberg, 'Improvement associations among the Afikpo Ibo', *Africa* 25.1 (1955) 1-29; for the southern Igbo in: Audrey C. Smock, *Ibo Politics: the Role of Ethnic Unions in Eastern Nigeria* (Cambridge, MA 1971) 28-30 and *passim*. Similar systems have been described for other Nigerian groups, such as the Ibibio. See: Edet A. Udo, *Who are the Ibibio?* (Onitsha 1983) 152.

<sup>30</sup> The title system has been described in: Azuka A. Dike, *The Resilience of Igbo Culture: a Case Study of Awka Town* (Enugu 1985) 82-137.

<sup>31</sup> See: Onwuejeogwu, *Nri Kingdom and Hegemony*; Hanny Hahn-Waanders, *Eze Institution in Igboland* (Nimo 1990).

<sup>32</sup> Oriji, *Traditions of Igbo Origin* 7.

illustrate that the notion of the egalitarian Igbo is not uncontested. Also, the egalitarian ideology went together with a frank acceptance of inequality. The more successful members of the community did not only have high status, but could also wield considerable power.<sup>33</sup>

### *Masquerades and festivals*

As is common in most societies in the West African rain forest belt, the communities celebrated a number of rituals and festivals connected to agriculture, fertility, and the relation between the living and the ancestors. These festivals addressed the village community as a whole, and functioned, among other things, as a representation of the community. They celebrated the shared identity of the village members, and illustrated the social and political set-up.<sup>34</sup> To call all these festivals 'Igbo festivals' would not be useful. In the first place, form and content of the festivals varied, while secondly, they were not unique to the Igbo. Comparable festivals were celebrated in many communities outside the Igbo area.

However, the festivals did have some aspects in common which have allowed them to become important elements of Igbo identity: most communities celebrated the eating of the first yam of the year, yam being the staple food in the area. These yam festivals were essentially local festivals. They were held at different moments in the different communities, and took different forms and were known under different Igbo names. Together, they have merged into something like an Igbo national ceremony, known under the English term New Yam Festival. Nowadays, the festival is celebrated everywhere, inside and outside of Nigeria, where Igbo people are residing.

During festivals, masks could come out. Masquerades, again, showed great variety, in form, timing, and function. The differences between even neighbouring villages were great.<sup>35</sup> Some masks were visible, others invisible. They could be small and nimble, or huge and elaborate and clumsy. Often, the small ones were considered the most dangerous, as they could run and chase the women and the young. Usually, there was music or noise-making to go with them. As part of the celebrations, these masquerades had an aspect of fun and entertainment. However, they also helped to maintain the social order in the community, as offenders against its norms were singled out and their offenses exposed. Sometimes, criminals were killed in a period when a mask was out. It was said of these people that the mask had killed the person.<sup>36</sup>

These masquerades and festivals were part of a perception of the world that included the existence of spirits (*mmo*), and a continuing relationship with the ancestors. The communities realized the need to entertain well-balanced relations between the unborn, the living, and the ancestors. The actual details of this world view differed considerable from the one community to the other, what matters here is that it was an important aspect of pre-colonial organization in

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<sup>33</sup> This is not peculiar to the communities in the pre-colonial Igbo area. It is thought to be a common feature among many communities in West Africa. See: John Iliffe, *Africans. The History of a Continent* (Cambridge 1995) 93.

<sup>34</sup> Simon Ottenberg, 'Psychological aspects of Igbo art', *African Arts* 21.1 (1988) 72-82; there 72, 77-78.

<sup>35</sup> Eli Bentor, The center in here - A critique of Igbo mask studies. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the African Studies Association, Boston 1993.

<sup>36</sup> A. O. Onyeneke, *The Dead among the Living. Masquerades in Igbo Society* (Nimo 1987).

the area, and it provided individuals with (part of) their identity, both within the community and as a community.

#### *Relations between the different communities*

In the early missionary and ethnographical literature on the area, pre-colonial Igbo communities were usually described as isolated from the world and from each other. In the 1890s, for example, one missionary noted that the Igbo 'never travel, and fear to go abroad.'<sup>37</sup> This notion of isolated communities was based on the observations that the policy units in the area were of a very small (village) scale, that the geography of large parts of the area hampered travelling, and that the on-going slave trade exposed travellers to the risk of being captured and sold as slaves. The missionary G. T. Basden claimed that:

the Ibos, prior to the British occupation of the country, occupied their spare time with fighting, generally town against town. The evil of this was not so much the blood shed, but rather the paralysing of trade and intercourse. It led to the isolation and independence of each town through the perpetual state of fear which existed.<sup>38</sup>

Although the fear and disruption caused by slave raids should not be underestimated, to some extent the idea of a paralysing of trade and intercourse resulted from the early writers' limited knowledge of the area, and their own difficulties travelling through it. The more recent studies stress that contact and interaction was a common feature in pre-colonial times and it may be assumed that pre-colonial communities were not as isolated as previously thought.<sup>39</sup> Contact could be found in the fields of trade, material culture, myths of origin, religion, and even in political power.

Widespread pre-colonial political power is ascribed to Nri, an Igbo community which in the eyes of many represents the ritual centre of the Igbo culture. In a number of villages a real or fictitious bond existed between that village's title society and Nri. In some cases, this bond merely referred to the opinion that the title society concerned had been instituted by Nri, while there were no actual dealings with Nri. In other cases, however, the initiation of new members of a title society had to be performed by an Nri priest. Nri priests, recognizable by the spears they carried and by the marks on their faces, wandered about through a part of the present Igboland, performing rituals. They invested political and religious functionaries, crowned chiefs, made peace, instituted markets, and consecrated shrines. Furthermore, they were called upon to determine which sacrifices were required when a taboo was violated in a community, and performed the necessary rites.

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<sup>37</sup> CMS; G3 A 3/O 1891/82. H. H. Dobinson, *Notes on a Journey into Ibo Land made by the Rev. H. H. Dobinson From the C.M.S.'s Station at Onitsha, Niger River, West Africa, January 5-10, 1891* (1891).

<sup>38</sup> G. T. Basden, *Among the Ibos of Nigeria* (London 1921; reprinted 1966) 202.

<sup>39</sup> See for example: A. E. Afigbo, *The Igbo and their Neighbours. Inter-Group Relations in Southeastern Nigeria to 1953* (Ibadan 1987); Ingeborg Maria Grau, *Die Igbo-sprechenden Völker Südostnigerias: Fragmentation und fundamentale Einheit in ihrer Geschichte* (1993).

Onwuejeogwu claims that, through its priests, Nri managed to control the internal and external politics of a number of Igbo settlements at least partially. Hence his claim of 'Nri hegemony', which originally extended to a much wider area than that in which Nri influence was recorded at the end of the nineteenth century. Onwuejeogwu argues that during the sixteenth century, Nri influence extended almost to the present boundaries of Igboland, but has declined since. As a result of this profound influence of Nri upon the different communities, he concludes, it is nowadays no longer possible to determine which elements of Igbo culture originate from Nri, and which have their roots in other Igbo communities. Among the important, generally shared components of Igbo culture which Onwuejeogwu mentions are: the rituals around the Kola nut and the white chalk customs, the liveliness of Igbo music and dance, the highly developed art of wall decoration and body painting, the patterns on earthenware and cloth, Igbo folklore and oral literature, masquerades, traditional games, and pastimes such as wrestling, acrobatics, archery, and fencing.<sup>40</sup>

Other foci for contact between the different communities in the area, extending beyond the present boundaries of Igboland, were provided by the several powerful oracles. These oracles functioned partly as courts of justice. Normally, cases were tried in the several villages, either through a public debate in the presence of the freeborn males, or through the mediation of the Nri priests. However, certain cases—which cases these were differed from community to community—were not tried in the villages and were referred to one of the powerful oracles in the area. In other instances, the oracles were used as a court of appeal to seek the revision of a decision arrived at in the village. These oracles attracted people from a wide area, often from far beyond the current borders of the Igbo area. Those who were found guilty were either killed or sold as slaves. Influential oracles in the area included the Aro oracle *Ibiniukpabi* in the extreme east, the *Agbala* oracle in Awka in the centre-north, and the *Igwe ka Ala* of Umunoha, the *Ogbunorie* of Ezimoha and the *Kamanu* of Ozuzu in the south.

Contact also occurred through trade. In the greater part of the area, local trade was facilitated by a system of rotating markets. Villages formed market circles, in which each village had its market on its own day in the week, the market day for that village. A market week consisted of four (occasionally eight) market days, the names of which are used throughout the area with only minor changes.

Middle and long distance trade used a network of trade routes. Trade with the groups to the north of the area either used the river Niger, which is thought to have constituted a regular trade route since the fifteenth century,<sup>41</sup> or one of the main land routes through Nsukka, which linked the central and eastern parts of the region with the north. Other trade routes linked the interior to the communities on the coast. One of the major commodities transported via those routes was slaves, who were exported both to the south to the trading states on the coast, and to

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<sup>40</sup> Onwuejeogwu, *Nri Kingdom and Hegemony* 8-14.

<sup>41</sup> A. E. Afigbo, 'Trade as a factor of contact: pre-colonial trade links between Southeastern Nigeria and the Benue Valley' in: A. E. Afigbo, *The Igbo and their Neighbours. Inter-Group Relations in Southeastern Nigeria to 1953* (Ibadan 1987) 53-75; there 58.

the north. From the north, horses were imported, while food and other products were also handled.

It was through the slave trade, long before the establishment of colonial rule in Southeast Nigeria, that the Igbo first became known to the Europeans. However, since the area was located in the interior there was no direct contact between Europeans on the coast and the communities in what is now Igboland. The population of the area participated in the slave trade, and many inhabitants of the area were exported, but their dealings with Europeans were conducted through the middle men from the coastal communities. The slave trade was dominated by one specific group from the area: the Aro.

The Aro community have their headquarters in Arochuku on the eastern fringe of the Igbo area, near the Cross River. It has been argued that they have been heavily influenced by their non-Igbo neighbours, and even that they are 'not really' Igbo. Probably from the eighteenth century onwards, the Aro have specialized in long distance trade in slaves, salt and luxury items imported from Europe. They developed a network of trade routes, along which Aro traders travelled in caravans for their safety. Along these trade routes a number of Aro communities or colonies developed, the inhabitants of which called themselves Aro and traced back their origin to Arochuku. Although the Aro are known as traders, a number of the Aro colonies have specialized in agriculture.

The Aro are thought to have contributed to the homogenization of Igbo culture since they had settlements in many villages and linked different communities through trade. Furthermore, the Arochuku oracle was consulted by many inhabitants of the region. However, it was often regarded as one oracle among others, and not as the most important oracle in the area. In the south of the area, it appears that Umunoha's *Igwe ka ala* oracle held the greatest influence.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, the influence of Arochuku was limited to a part of the present Igbo area, and within this area only a limited number of fixed trade routes were used,<sup>43</sup> ignoring a considerable part of the population. On the other hand, the influence of Arochuku was not limited to the Igbo area: their trade network included a part of the current Ibibio territory, the Cameroons, and Tiv, Igala, and Idoma areas.<sup>44</sup> The oracle in Arochuku also attracted people from groups which were situated to the east, south, and north of the present Igbo area.

Other groups were also active traders. Groups such as Awka, Nri, and Nkwere had their own trade specialties and areas of influence. The Awka blacksmiths operated a trade network which extended from their home town Awka in all directions, usually crossing the boundaries of the present Igbo area, to places such as Igala in the north and Benin in the west. The travelling Awka men were not just blacksmiths, but also acted as agents for the *Agbala* oracle. A similar network was operated by the blacksmiths from Nkwere town. In part of the southern Igbo area, trade was dominated by the Nkwere. Non-Nkwere traders travelled under Nkwere *pax* and as *Umu Nkwere* (Nkwere sons).<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Ubah, *Igboland in transition*, 71-72.

<sup>43</sup> F. I. Ekejiuba, 'The Aro trade system in the nineteenth century', *Ikenga. Journal of African Studies* 1.1 (1972) 11-26; there 15-16.

<sup>44</sup> Chinyere Okafor, 'Aro diaspora: a cultural and historical overview' in: J. O. Ijoma, *Arochukwu History and Culture* (Enugu 1986) 113-138; there 114, 123.

<sup>45</sup> Onwuka N. Njoku, 'An old wine in a new bottle: The Aro of Southeastern Nigeria, 1650-1980 by Kenneth O. Dike

*A pre-colonial Igbo identity?*

Contacts between groups that are nowadays recognized as part of Igboland have been stressed by scholars in order to claim the existence of a pre-colonial 'Igbo culture area'. However, the pre-colonial period was not only characterized by contacts between the different groups that nowadays belong to the Igbo; the contact between 'Igbo' and 'non-Igbo' in Southeast Nigeria was equally intensive. These contacts were not limited to migration, war and trade, but extended to the ritual and religious areas. In a number of cases 'mythical charters' existed between communities inside and outside the Igbo culture area, which described an assumed kinship bond between the groups.<sup>46</sup>

As has been mentioned above for the Aro oracle, oracles in the pre-colonial Igbo culture area extended their influence to the inhabitants of other areas. Afigbo described the example of the Ogruru oracle, the *Onojo Oboni*, which greatly influenced the Igala royal family. He based this opinion on the tradition that each newly installed Igala leader was obliged to consult the Ogruru oracle in order to acquire the impartiality necessary for the administration of justice. Historical evidence suggests that culture inside and outside the Igbo culture area was interwoven. However, Afigbo's claim that 'therefore, this period of south-eastern Nigeria history could be cautiously designated as one marked by Igbo dominance',<sup>47</sup> may not be fully justified. For example, in the Nsukka region in the north of the Igbo area, neither Nri nor Arochuku were very influential. Rather, there appears to have been an overall Igala influence in this region: in many towns the lineages have Igala, rather than Igbo names, while the title system is that of the Igala, rather than Igbo. The term for big man or chief that is used in Nsukka is an Igala term, while there were a number of muslim families. It is thought that the Nsukka area was conquered and occupied by Igala in the early nineteenth century.<sup>48</sup> This would explain the spread of the *ikenga* woodcarvings, representing a seated human male shrine figure. This type of woodcarving is nowadays considered to be typically Igbo, although it used to be confined to the northern Igbo area and the Igala.<sup>49</sup>

Other ties and influences also existed. For instance, some Igbo communities west of the Niger claim Yoruba ancestry.<sup>50</sup> Historians and others have raised the question as to what extent the eastern Yoruba and the western Igbo have influenced each other, although no research has yet been dedicated to this question. A debate has been held as to what extent the Benin Kingdom has influenced and controlled the western Igbo, or whether perhaps there has been an influence on Benin by the western Igbo (of course, both types of influence may have occurred

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and Felicia Ekejiuba', *Nigerian Heritage* 3 (1994) 131-137; there 134.

<sup>46</sup> Afigbo, *1981 Ahiajoku Lecture* 14-26.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibidem*, 25.

<sup>48</sup> Austin J. Shelton, *The Igbo-Igala Borderland. Religion and Social Control in Indigenous African Colonialism* (Albany 1971) 9-20, 32.

<sup>49</sup> Ottenberg, 'Psychological aspects of Igbo art' 75.

<sup>50</sup> Oriji, *Traditions of Igbo Origin* 66.

simultaneously).<sup>51</sup> Apart from the question of dominance and influence, the pre-colonial Igbo area shared many elements of culture with other groups in West Africa. The system of market weeks, for example, which is often considered characteristically Igbo and serves as an illustration of Igbo entrepreneurial character, appears to be a relatively common system, found among many West-African groups, such as the Nupe.<sup>52</sup> Similarly, the New Yam Festival is not an exclusively Igbo phenomenon. Festivities around the new yam are celebrated throughout the West-African yam belt which stretches from Cameroon to the Ivory Coast.<sup>53</sup> Other aspects of pre-colonial culture that are often presented as 'typically Igbo' are also found elsewhere in West Africa. Examples are the large, complex households, the egalitarian ideology, and the concept of the 'bad bush' where those who could not be granted a proper burial (victims of smallpox, leprosy, suicide or execution) were cast.<sup>54</sup>

On these grounds I argue that the pre-colonial history of the present Igbo area does not prove the existence of a clearly defined cultural or historical 'proto Igbo' unit. On the one hand, significant aspects that are nowadays recognized as characteristic of Igbo culture, such as title societies, age grades, or *osu* slavery, were only present in certain parts of the area.<sup>55</sup> On the other hand, the boundaries between what today are Igbo and non-Igbo were not at all clear. There were strong bonds between parts within the area, as well as with communities outside the area. Rather than a slumbering Igbo national culture, merely waiting to be awakened, pre-colonial Iboland appears to be a rather arbitrarily defined part of a much broader West African coastal culture. This culture complex, with many differences and local peculiarities, stretched from Cameroon in the east to Ghana and beyond in the west.

The existence of a pre-colonial shared Igbo identity, therefore, is highly unlikely. Rather, a great number of different identities existed, relating to groups that are nowadays accepting Igbo identity. It has been argued, for example, that the Nkwere people, in an effort to distinguish themselves from 'pretenders' travelling and trading under the Nkwere *pax*, began to refer to themselves as *Nkwere Kpom Kwem*, 'Nkwere of the true blood'.<sup>56</sup> The Aro looked down upon non-Aro whom they regarded as *ndi mba ovia*, 'bush people', or *ndi mba kamesi*, 'uncivilized people', and marriages between Aro and non-Aro were considered undesirable (although they occurred).<sup>57</sup>

It may be relevant and appropriate to late twentieth century social and political debate to claim, as Isichei does, that 'the broad underlying similarities are ultimately more significant than the differences',<sup>58</sup> and that therefore an Igbo people existed in pre-colonial times, living in a centuries-old 'Iboland', but this is not historically accurate. Much of what Isichei presents as

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<sup>51</sup> A. E. Afigbo, 'Igbo-Benin relations: some problems in methodology and perspective' in: A. E. Afigbo, *The Igbo and their Neighbours. Inter-Group Relations in Southeastern Nigeria to 1953* (Ibadan 1987) 10-25.

<sup>52</sup> Iliffe, *Africans* 86.

<sup>53</sup> M. J. C. Echeruo, *1979 Ahiajoku Lecture* (Owerri 1979) 9; Ivor Wilks, *Forests of Gold. Essays on the Akan and the Kingdom of Asante* (Athens 1993) 115.

<sup>54</sup> Iliffe, *Africans* 81 and 93.

<sup>55</sup> V. C. Uchendu, *1995 Ahiajoku Lecture* (Owerri 1995) 56.

<sup>56</sup> Njoku, 'An old wine in a new bottle' 134.

<sup>57</sup> Okafor, 'Aro diaspora' 125.

<sup>58</sup> Elizabeth Isichei, *The Ibo People and the Europeans. The Genesis of a Relationship - to 1906* (London 1973) 71.

pre-colonial Igbo history is not exclusively Igbo but relates equally to the Ibibio and to other groups in Southeast Nigeria.<sup>59</sup>

Indeed, to talk about an Igboland in pre-colonial times would be anachronistic. The relevance of pre-colonial society does not lie in the existence of a ready-to-wear Igbo identity, but in its rich reservoir of culture elements which have meaning to modern Igbo individuals. Modern Igbo identity is to a large extent defined through the elements of culture, and social and political characteristics, found among the area's pre-colonial societies: the social and political organization of life in the village, the emphasis on land and agriculture, the close links to the ancestors in the village, and the rituals, masquerades and festivals.

### **2.3 The history of an ethnonym**

The oldest known reference to 'Igbo' dates from 1627, when 'Ibo' was mentioned in a list with places of origin of slaves.<sup>60</sup> Until 1857, the year in which the Church Missionary Society started its Niger Mission, the Igbo were mentioned regularly—but always briefly—in European sources, usually in connection with the transatlantic slave trade. Remarks on Ibos, Eboes, Heboes, and Hackbous have all, with more or less certainty, been traced to the Igbo.<sup>61</sup> To my knowledge, the Igbo are not mentioned in Arabic sources.

This long history of references in European sources to an 'Igbo' people seems to contradict the previous section's conclusion that a shared Igbo identity did not exist in pre-colonial times. However, it may be useful to consider what an ethnonym stands for, as there is no reason to assume that references to 'Ibo' in the eighteenth or nineteenth century refer to the same thing as the modern term 'Igbo'. While the modern term is used by the Igbo themselves, the evidence I have from earlier periods relate to the use of the term by outsiders. As I have mentioned above, the Igbo themselves only recently have come to regard the term as an acceptable name for themselves and their language. In 1931, colonial officer M. D. W. Jeffreys noted that: 'none of the peoples described to-day as Igbo by the European will admit the term as descriptive of his race or language nor will he use it of himself.' Jeffreys nevertheless

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<sup>59</sup> G. I. Jones noted that 'While this approach may encourage the morale of Igbo readers, it is bound to give offense to other Nigerians'. Review of Isichei's *A History of the Igbo People in Africa* 50 (1980) 100-101.

<sup>60</sup> P. E. H. Hair, *The Early Study of Nigerian Languages* (London 1967) 71. Isichei and others refer to an even older source: the 1505 description by the Portuguese traveller Duarte Pacheco Pereira of a country called Opuu: 'A hundred leagues upstream towards the source of the Rio Feroso is a negro country called Opuu. Here there is much pepper and ivory and some slaves.' (Fragment included in Elizabeth Isichei, *Igbo Worlds: an Anthology of Oral Histories and Historical Descriptions* (Philadelphia 1978) 9). However, the only proof for this assumption is the fact that one informant during the 1854 Niger Expedition argued that 'Opu' was an Igala word for the Igbo. Also, a hundred leagues is around 500 kilometers, and hence rather further north than the present Igbo area. Of course, Pereira had obtained his knowledge from informants who may not have provided him with accurate distances, but that only implies that his description could refer to many other groups as well as Igbo. Therefore, I conclude that there is insufficient evidence to identify Pereira's Opuu as Igbo.

<sup>61</sup> See for example the fragments included in T. Hodgkin, ed., *Nigerian Perspectives: an Historical Anthology* (London 1975<sup>2</sup>) or those in Isichei's *Igbo Worlds*, and texts such as James Africanus Horton, *West African Countries and Peoples* (1868; reprinted Edinburgh 1969).

predicted that 'just as Welsh is the Anglo-Saxon term, meaning foreigner or stranger, and has now been accepted as the name of a people and their language so also must Igbo be accepted as designating a people and their language.'<sup>62</sup> As recently as in 1950, Forde and Jones argued that the term Igbo was used mainly for the language, 'secondarily for Ibo-speaking groups other than one's own, but with reference to oneself only when speaking to a European.'<sup>63</sup>

In this section, therefore, I will trace the history of the ethnonym 'Igbo' in order to shed light on the ways in which the notion 'Igbo' has changed and developed through history.

### *The historical dimension of ethnonyms*

Two general remarks need to be made about ethnonyms. The first remark is that ethnonyms have histories.<sup>64</sup> An ethnonym is introduced as such at a given moment in history. After that, it may change shape: changing pronunciation or spelling; change contents: ascribing new characteristics to the group it refers to; or change scope: referring to a wider or more limited group. It may gain popularity or pass into disuse. Although most of the time, people who use a name take it for granted, ethnonyms often have to be negotiated. This may happen when one group is represented by more than one ethnonym, or when a new ethnonym is coined that may do more justice to the group it describes. In the case of Zimbabwe, after independence some historians and writers lobbied in vain for the replacement of the ethnonym 'Shona', which they considered to be a left-over from colonialism, with the term 'Mbire'.<sup>65</sup> In another case, in the city of Calabar in Southeast Nigeria, the association of migrants from the Cross River in 1952 forbade the use of the ethnonym 'Atam'. It was claimed that the name was no longer appropriate because in Calabar it had acquired the connotation 'harlots', which was thought to be the consequence of the attitude and behaviour of Atam women in that city.<sup>66</sup>

The second remark is that ethnonyms are often coined first by 'outsiders', that is, non-members of the group. These names sometimes stand for nothing more than 'otherness' or indeed 'barbarism'.<sup>67</sup> An example that I have mentioned above is the Aro term *ndi mba kamesi*, which connotes 'the uncivilized' and was used for non-Aro people.<sup>68</sup> Often, ethnonyms are derived from the geographical location of a group, indicating, for example, the people living to the north, or the people on the hill.<sup>69</sup> Similarly, one of the Igbo sub-groups is called Ohafia,

<sup>62</sup> NAE; CSE 1/85/4596<sup>A</sup> M. D. W. Jeffreys, Awka Division Anthropological Report 1931. The essential difference (which Jeffreys failed to note) between the Igbo and the Welsh is of course that although the Welsh now accept 'Wales' when speaking English, in Welsh they use 'Cymru'. The Igbo, however, nowadays have no different term with the same meaning that they can use when speaking in Igbo.

<sup>63</sup> C. Daryll Forde and G. I. Jones, *The Ibo and Ibibio-speaking Peoples of South-Eastern Nigeria* (London 1950) 9.

<sup>64</sup> Jean Bazin, 'A chacun son Bambara' in: J.-L. Amselle and E. M'Bokolo, *Au Coeur de l'Ethnie. Ethnies, Tribalisme et État en Afrique* (Paris 1985) 87-127; there 96-106.

<sup>65</sup> Herbert Chimhundu, 'Early missionaries and the ethnolinguistic factor during the "invention of tribalism" in Zimbabwe', *The Journal of African History* 33.1 (1992) 87-109; there 89.

<sup>66</sup> NAE; OGP/PROF 2/1/2509 Resolution of Calabar, 2 November 1952.

<sup>67</sup> Bazin, 'A chacun son Bambara' 100.

<sup>68</sup> Okafor, 'Aro diaspora' 125.

<sup>69</sup> Félix Iroko, 'Regard extérieur et saisie interne des ethnies et des ethnonymes. République populaire du Bénin' in: J.-P. Chrétien and G. Prunier, eds., *Les Ethnies ont une Histoire* (Paris 1989) 213-222; there 219.

'people from thick bush'. Ethnonyms can also be seen as short descriptions, referring to one of the group's perceived characteristics. This is said to be the case for the name of the Efik, a neighbouring ethnic group to the Igbo. It is claimed that 'Efik' means 'tyrant' or 'he who oppresses', a reference to the group's active role in the slave trade.<sup>70</sup> Apparently, in a number of instances such descriptions from outside have later been appropriated by the people thus labelled to serve as their ethnic or national name. This is not surprising, as it is usually in the context of the interaction with others that a group defines and maintains its own identity. Until recently, some African ethnic groups do not appear to have used an actual ethnonym when referring to themselves collectively. In the case of the Shona it has been noted that, in the late nineteenth century, they simply referred to themselves as 'we are people'.<sup>71</sup>

In Africa, one particular group of outsiders who have been involved in the coining of ethnonyms are the Europeans. The creation *ex nihilo* of ethnic groups—which has received a lot of attention in recent scholarly debate—is only one, extreme aspect of this European influence. More often, Europeans 'discovered' ethnic groups, by introducing existing pre-colonial ethnonyms into a new context, or by changing toponyms into ethnonyms. European notions in this way contributed to the transformation of existing political units into ethnic groups.<sup>72</sup>

In Southeast Nigeria, at least some colonial officers were aware that a changing of toponyms into ethnonyms was occurring. In one report it was noted that among colonial officers:

There is a tendency to regard the people of [a] geographical division who adopt a common name to distinguish their land from other varieties of soil, as forming a clan or even a tribe. Such groups of people can no more be regarded as forming a clan or tribe than can the people in an English county be regarded as a clan.<sup>73</sup>

A well-known Nigerian example of the use of an existing ethnonym in a new context is the introduction of the term 'Yoruba' in the mid-nineteenth century for a group then called 'Aku'. Linguists and missionaries recognized that the ethnonym 'Aku' was not an historical name, as it was derived from the mode of greeting used by the people thus named, which sounded like 'aku'. Anglican Missionaries thereupon adopted the term 'Yoruba', which was the Hausa name of one of the political units within the Yoruba area, Oyo.<sup>74</sup> This choice did not go unchallenged. The linguist and missionary S. W. Koelle, for example, did not approve of the term Yoruba at all. Writing in 1854, he asserted that the term was 'unhistorical, having never been used of the whole Aku nation by anybody, except for the last few years by the Missionaries'.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> David Abernethy, *The Political Dilemma of Popular Education. An African Case* (Stanford 1969) 309.

<sup>71</sup> Chumhundu, 'Early missionaries' 89.

<sup>72</sup> Jean-Loup Amselle, 'Ethnies et espaces: pour une anthropologie topologique' in: Jean-Loup Amselle and Elikia M'Bokolo, eds., *Au Coeur de l'Ethnie. Ethnies, Tribalisme et État en Afrique* (Paris 1985) 39.

<sup>73</sup> NAE; CSE 1/85/4596<sup>A</sup> M. D. W. Jeffreys, Awka Division Anthropological Report 1931, 20.

<sup>74</sup> J. D. Y. Peel, 'The cultural work of Yoruba ethnogenesis' in: E. Tonkin, M. McDonald and M. Chapman, eds., *History and Ethnicity* (London 1989) 198-215; there 202. Peel mentions as reason for the adoption of the Hausa name by the missionaries, that the first eyewitness accounts of Oyo were published in England in 1829-32 by travellers who used Hausa as their language of communication.

<sup>75</sup> S. W. Koelle, *Polyglotta Africana; or a Comparative Vocabulary of nearly three hundred Words and Phrases in*

He furthermore concluded that, as the name was incorrect, it would never be accepted by the different tribes as the name for the whole nation.<sup>76</sup> Koelle, underestimating the missionaries' impact upon society, was wrong.

In a number of cases, Europeans arrived at wrong ethnonyms when they accepted at face value the claims of African interpreters. The Europeans ignored the fact that many of these claims reflected ethno-centric value judgements of ethnic groups *vis-à-vis* each other, rather than objective facts. Thus names used by neighbouring groups—names which were often pejorative—were turned into ethnonyms.<sup>77</sup>

However, not all colonial ethnonyms were wrong. More important than the consideration that current ethnonyms may be the result of a misunderstanding by Europeans—including, in Nigeria, Westernized Africans from (mainly) Sierra Leone—is the insight that ethnonyms reflect the dynamism of ethnicity in general. They contribute to ethnicity's 'trick' of clothing modernity in the guise of tradition. Therefore, ethnonyms mean different things at different times. When we find what is a present-day ethnonym in sources from the past, we cannot assume without qualification that this refers to the same people as it would today, or that it refers to an ethnic group at all.

#### *Speculations on the etymology of 'Igbo'*

The original meaning of the term 'Igbo' is not known. It has been remarked above that, although the term can be traced back in European sources for centuries, the Igbo themselves only very recently have come to regard the term as an acceptable name for themselves and their language. Chinua Achebe once suggested that 'Igbo' was originally applied by groups as a general term to refer to the neighbouring clan,<sup>78</sup> thus as a term to mark 'the other'. Indeed, the inhabitants of Onitsha used the term to indicate the people living to the east of the town, while the people of Nri used it to refer to the people living around them. To the latter, the term also seems to have implied a relation of power, as they claimed to 'eat Igbo'.<sup>79</sup>

Several explanations exist of the origins of the term 'Igbo'. According to Murray Last, it may derive from the term Mbau or Mbu that was initially used to indicate savanna peoples, but may have been the basis for many other Nigerian terms, such as the Hausa term 'Bawa' (slave). The term 'mbo' was commonly applied to a subordinate group, or its ruler. Last suggests that both the Yoruba term 'Igbo' and the Igbo ethnonym may ultimately derive from this usage.<sup>80</sup> However, most evidence of the use of the term 'Igbo' as Igbo ethnonym relates to people to the south, rather than the north. It has also been argued that 'Igbo' was a Yoruba term initially,

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*more than one hundred Distinct African Languages* (1854; 2nd edition: 1963 [with an introduction by P. E. H. Hair]) 4.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>77</sup> Iroko, 'Regard extérieur et saisie interne des ethnies et des ethnonymes' 214-219.

<sup>78</sup> Paul Edwards refers to a personal communication with Achebe in the introduction to the reprint of Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa the African* 2 Vols. (London 1789; reprinted 'with a new introduction by Paul Edwards' 1969) xix.

<sup>79</sup> NAE; CSE 1/85/4596<sup>A</sup> M. D. W. Jeffreys, Awka Division Anthropological Report 1931.

<sup>80</sup> Murray Last, 'The early kingdoms of the Nigerian savanna' in: J. F. Ade Ajayi and Michael Crowder, eds., *History*

indicating 'people from the bush'.<sup>81</sup> However, on linguistical grounds it is highly unlikely that the Igbo term 'Igbo' can be traced back to Yoruba.<sup>82</sup> The Igbo communities living along the river Niger make a distinction between *ndi oru* and *ndi igbo*, meaning 'people from the riverbank' and 'people from the interior or forest' respectively. In this case, once again, a link may be suggested with the Yoruba word indicating 'forest' or 'grove'.<sup>83</sup> According to Onwuejeogwu, who compared a number of Igbo words with the word 'Igbo' as either suffix or prefix, the resulting semantic pattern indicates that the original meaning of Igbo is 'community of people'.<sup>84</sup>

In parts of the Niger Delta, the term 'Igbõ' is used in the meaning of 'slave'. It is possible that this refers to an older ethnonym 'Igbo' which acquired a new meaning, but in Kolokuma the word seems to mean 'northern' rather than specifically Igbo.<sup>85</sup> This also may have been the original meaning of the term, since the slaves that were employed and traded in the Niger Delta all came from the interior, which is located to the north of the Delta. Nineteenth century missionaries found that the slaves which were employed by the traders from the important coastal town of Bonny were all Igbo.<sup>86</sup>

There are more instances of the use of the word Igbo to indicate 'slave'. The people living on the western bank of the river Niger were reported to attach a similar meaning to the term 'Ibo'.<sup>87</sup> During the period of the slave trade, it appears that the Igbo living on the banks of the River Niger as well as other riverain groups, used the term *ndi igbo* to mean 'slaves', applying to themselves the term *ndi olu*. This might suggest that the contrast *ndi igbo* - *ndi olu* does not merely indicate a geographical distinction between hinterland or upland people and riverain people.<sup>88</sup>

### *The slave trade*

It is in their capacity as slaves that the Igbo are found in pre-nineteenth century written sources. These sources include statistics relating to the slave trade, the reports from slaving captains, and the accounts of missionaries who were active among the slave population in the American

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of *West Africa* 3rd edition, Volume I (1985) 167-224; there 174.

<sup>81</sup> Jones, Review of Isichei's *History of the Igbo People* 100-101.

<sup>82</sup> T. L. Cook and Kay R. M. Williamson pointed out to me the differences in tones and meaning between the Igbo and the Yoruba terms. Personal communications.

<sup>83</sup> Victor Manfredi, *Agbò and Éhugbò: Igbo linguistic consciousness, its origins and limits* (Ph.D.-thesis; Cambridge, MA 1991) 306. Kay R.M. Williamson would suggest as translation 'upland' rather than 'forest' (personal communication).

<sup>84</sup> M. A. Onwuejeogwu, 'The dawn of Igbo civilization in the Igbo Culture Area', *Odinani. The Journal of the Odinani Museum Nri* 1.1 (1972) 15-56; there 40-41.

<sup>85</sup> Kay R. M. Williamson, personal communication.

<sup>86</sup> CMS; G3 A 3/O 1881/131. Archdeacon Crowther, Notes on the different languages spoken on the Niger; CMS; G3 A 3/O 1889/87. Bishop Crowther, A visit to the Markets in the interior of Ibo from Bonny, May 1889.

<sup>87</sup> Frances M. Dennis, 'Iboland, Southern Nigeria', *The Church Missionary Review* (July 1908) 407.

<sup>88</sup> Richard N. Henderson, *The King in Every Man. Evolutionary Trends in Onitsha Ibo Society and Culture* (1972) 40-41. Henderson suggests the distinction has a whole range of implications, contrasting *olu*—riverain, or riverain-derived, slave dealing, kingdom-associated peoples—and *igbo*—upland, slave-providing, kingship-lacking populations. See also I. U. Ezeakunne, 'The Igbo language and the natives speakers', *Ugo* 1.1 (1977) 22-27; there 22.

colonies.

As I have mentioned above, in 1627 'Ibo' was included in a list with nineteen places of origin of slaves classified as 'Caravalties particulares'. The list had been compiled by Alonso de Sandoval, a Spanish priest who had been working among slaves in Cartagena. He used the term 'Caravalties particulares' to indicate a group of forty to fifty independent villages who recognized no king, fought regularly, often sold their women and children as slaves, and were all cannibals.<sup>89</sup> More elaborate information was collected by C. G. A. Oldendorp, a Moravian Brother who had been assigned to write the history of the work of the protestant mission to the slave population on the Danish Antilles. During 1767 and 1768, in order to gather information necessary to write this history, Oldendorp conducted many interviews with African-born slaves. These interviews allowed him to reconstruct several African nations, including, on the basis of five informants, that of the Igbo.<sup>90</sup>

One exceptional source is the autobiography of Olaudah Equiano (1745?-1797), who was caught at a young age and sold as a slave. After being a slave in Africa and America, he was taken to Europe by his owner, where he learned to read, write, calculate and navigate. He purchased his freedom when he was nineteen and settled in Britain, where he married an English woman. Although at one stage a slave-owner himself, he later campaigned for the abolition of the slave trade and, in 1789, published an autobiography which became a best-seller. In the book, Equiano mentions as his birth-place 'a charming fruitful vale, named Essaka',<sup>91</sup> located in one of the most remote and fertile districts of the kingdom Benin: Eboe (usually identified as Igbo). It should be noted that Equiano uses Eboe as a toponym, and not as an ethnonym, and he presents himself as an African and Christian, not as an Eboe. However, he does mention the term Oye-Eboe (possibly *Onye Igbo*, 'Igbo men?') for traders who visited the market in his town of birth.<sup>92</sup>

In those days, the coast to the south of the Igbo area—roughly from Brass in the west to Calabar in the east—was known to Europeans as the Bight of Biafra, which constituted one of the most important and most steady sources of slaves for the Atlantic slave trade.<sup>93</sup> Figures relating to the major slave ports indicate that between 1730 and 1830, exports from the Bight of Biafra accounted for between ten and twenty percent of the total African slave exports to the New World.<sup>94</sup> Of these, a large percentage were labelled 'Igbo'. According to slaving captain John Adams, who visited West Africa ten times between 1789 and 1800, at least four-fifths of the slaves annually sold at the main port, Bonny, were 'natives of one nation, called Heebo'.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Hair, *The Early Study of Nigerian Languages* 71; John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1680* (Cambridge 1992) xxvi.

<sup>90</sup> Britta Rupp-Eisenreich, 'L'ethnicité, critère descriptif au XVIIIe siècle: le cas de la traite Danoise' in: J.-P. Chrétien and G. Prunier, eds., *Les Ethnies ont une Histoire* (Paris 1989) 49-60; there 49-51, 56.

<sup>91</sup> Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* 5.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibidem*, *passim*; see also: A. E. Afigbo, 'Through a glass darkly' in: A. E. Afigbo, *Ropes of Sand: Studies in Igbo History and Culture* (Nsukka 1981) 148-156.

<sup>93</sup> Philip D. Curtin, *The Atlantic Slave Trade. A Census* (Madison 1969) 260.

<sup>94</sup> David Northrup, 'The compatibility of the slave and palm oil trades in the Bight of Biafra', *Journal of African History* 17.3 (1976) 353-364.

<sup>95</sup> Isichei, *Igbo Worlds* 11 [Isichei provides a fragment from: John Adams, *Remarks on the Country Extending from*

This does not necessarily mean, however, that four-fifths of the slaves exported from Bonny actually belonged to one ethnic group or nation, called Igbo. Adams' source for information on the ethnic origin of the slave population will have been the African slave traders, not a careful interviewing of each individual slave. When it is remembered that in the Delta the word Igbō indicated 'slave' or sometimes 'northerner' (although we do not know how far back in time these meanings go), it becomes quite possible that Adams' 'Heebo' was not an ethnonym, but referred to a social position (slave status) or to geographical origin (from the north).

Contact between Europeans and Africans was limited to a relatively small number of traders in the few coastal towns that specialised in the Atlantic trade, namely Bonny, Okrika, and New Calabar. The position of these towns was rather precarious, since all the goods they exported to the Europeans—mainly slaves, but also foodstuffs to feed the slaves, ivory and pepper—they themselves had to import from the north. In order to protect their position as middlemen, they had to prevent the Europeans from buying directly from traders in the interior. For this reason, and because of the competition of other coastal towns, they had to be very compliant with the European traders. Thus the moment a European slaving ship arrived, large canoes immediately sailed up the river to fetch the merchandise.<sup>96</sup> They also tried to shield their hinterland by providing the Europeans with as little information as possible. For a long time, these strategies proved successful. The European traders found that slaves were both plentiful and cheap on the coast, and had no incentive to scout the interior.<sup>97</sup>

For centuries, to outsiders not much more was known about the hinterland than that it was a source of slaves. Adams could merely inform his readers that 'The Heebos, to judge by the immense number annually sent into slavery, inhabit a country of great extent, and extremely populous, the southern boundary of which may be comprised between Cape Formosa and Old Calabar.'<sup>98</sup> Oldendorp, from his interviews, had gained more detailed data (though not necessarily accurate). He could mention that the Igbo inhabited a vast country in the interior, in the heart of which the Ibibio had their own state; that Egypt was not far away and was called Alo (this probably refers to the Aro), and that Igbo traders went there in search of rifles, swords, gunpowder, bullets, cloth, *etcetera*. He furthermore asserted that the Igbo were engaged in a continuing war against the Igan and the Evo (the latter, Oldendorp noted, were cannibals).<sup>99</sup> Oldendorp also mentioned that the Igbo king was called 'oba', which may refer to the Oba of Benin (to the west of the Igbo).

Descriptions of the Igbo from the era of the slave trade chiefly relate to their perceived ethnic characteristics. As a result of their professional preoccupations, slaving captains tended to highlight those traits that seemed important to slave owners, such as industry, proneness to

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*Cape Palmas to the River Congo* (London 1823) 129-134].

<sup>96</sup> L. I. Izuakor, 'Patterns of pre-colonial exploitation' in: Toyin Falola, ed., *Britain and Nigeria: Exploitation or Development?* (London 1987) 33.

<sup>97</sup> However, in contrast to this F. I. Ekejiuba provides examples of European slave ships waiting for months for the human cargo to be delivered. F. I. Ekejiuba, 'The Aro trade system in the nineteenth century. Part II', *Ikenga. Journal of African Studies* 1.2 (1972) 10-21; there 12.

<sup>98</sup> Quoted in: Isichei, *Igbo Worlds* 12.

<sup>99</sup> Rupp-Eisenreich, 'L'ethnicité, critère descriptif' 56. I do not know to which groups the terms Igan and Evo may refer.

rebellion, faithfulness, honesty, and physical suitability for work on the fields. Thus Adams wrote about the Igbo that they were 'tall and well formed, many of the women symmetrically so,' while 'Their dispositions are naturally timid and desponding.'<sup>100</sup> Captain Hugh Crow noted that the Igbo were

of a more mild and engaging disposition than the other tribes ... and though less suited for the severe manual labour of the field, they are preferred in the West India colonies for their fidelity and utility, as domestic servants, particularly if taken there when young, as then they become the most industrious of any of the tribes taken to the colonies.<sup>101</sup>

Equiano, writing with the experience of being an ex-slave as well as an ex-slave-owner, stated that 'The West India planters prefer the slaves of Benin or Eboe to those of any other part of Guinea for their hardiness, intelligence, integrity, and zeal.'<sup>102</sup> The slaving captains stressed that the Igbo were not likely to rebel and were very co-operative, which traits have led the Igbo slaves to be condemned as 'cowards' and 'foul feeders' by a later author.<sup>103</sup> However, this picture contrasts with an alternative image of the Igbo as an obstinate and rebellious people, who often led in slave revolts.<sup>104</sup>

Things are not made clearer by the prevalent unreliability of the nomenclature used in the Atlantic trade. In the dispersed surviving records for the Atlantic slave trade, slaves exported from the Bight of Biafra were classified as Igbo, Moco, Bibi or Ibibio, Calabari, and Ara. Of these, the Igbo were the largest group, making up between 50 and 90 percent of exports traced back to the Bight of Biafra.<sup>105</sup> In a critical examination of the terminology used, Philip Curtin identified the Moco as a diverse range of peoples and cultures shipped from slave ports on the lower Cross River, while Calabari could either refer to people shipped from New Calabar, or to Old Calabar. In the first case, they would be mainly Igbo and Ijo (the above mentioned 1627 listing of 'Ibo' referred to a list of slaves otherwise classified as Calabari). In the latter, they might be either Efik, Ibibio or other, the term carrying much the same meaning as Moco.<sup>106</sup>

Curtin did not critically examine the category Igbo as he did for Moco and Calabari. Rather, Igbo seems to have been taken at face value to be similar to the modern meaning of the term. This is not the case, however, and the category 'Igbo' used in the context of the slave trade is actually a rather problematic term. This was already noticed by Robert Cust, who in the 1880s used sources derived from missionary work among slaves and former slaves, when working on an overview of languages spoken in Africa. He warned against the danger of entering names under Igbo which actually refer to other groups, because, he claimed, in

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<sup>100</sup> Quoted in Isichei, *Igbo Worlds* 12.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibidem* 14.

<sup>102</sup> Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*.

<sup>103</sup> S. E. Ogude, *Genius in Bondage* (Ile-Ife 1983), quoted in Donatus Nwoga, 'The changing identity of the Igbo in literature' in: *Literature and African Identity* Bayreuth African Studies Series 6 (Bayreuth 1986) 75-103; there 79. Nwoga strongly disagrees with this view, and claims that Ogude based his judgement on 'biased evidence'.

<sup>104</sup> Nwoga, 'The changing identity of the Igbo in literature' 77-79.

<sup>105</sup> Curtin, *The Atlantic Slave Trade* 188, 192-194, 245, 260.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibidem*, 188. On 'Calabari' see: Hair, *The Early Study of Nigerian Languages* 71.

America all the slaves who came from the Niger were called 'Ibo'.<sup>107</sup>

Another example can be found in the work of the missionary John Clarke. Clarke started to collect vocabularies among the (former) slave population in Jamaica during the 1830s, and continued his investigations as a missionary on the island Fernando Po in the Bight of Biafra.<sup>108</sup> His efforts resulted in his *Specimens of Dialects: Short Vocabularies of Languages: and Notes of Countries and Customs in Africa*, published in 1848. In the book, Clarke identifies 35 tribes or nations as Igbo. Clarke's descriptions and sample vocabularies have been critically studied by Edwin Ardener, who concluded that of the 35 Igbo groups mentioned by Clarke, 20 are indeed Igbo, whereas 15 are not. Among the wrongly identified are the Bretshi or Itshi, who did not form a country, as Clarke thought, but belonged to a class of titled men; the Grou, who Ardener could not identify (but the included vocabulary is of the Kru in Liberia); and Oyo, which is in Yoruba (West Nigeria).<sup>109</sup>

### Sierra Leone Igbo

The ethnonym 'Igbo', as it was used in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, basically referred to slaves. It is unclear whether the African population of the coastal trading towns, who exported the Igbo slaves in large numbers, actually considered the Igbo to be an ethnic group or nation. Nevertheless, the existence of an Igbo nation or ethnic group was always implied in the way the word was used by Europeans, although none of them had yet visited an Igbo community. The earliest documented community that regarded itself as 'Igbo' (mainly made up of ex-slaves) developed in the first half of the nineteenth century, not in Southeast Nigeria, but in Sierra Leone.

The Sierra Leone Igbo community owed its existence to a decision by the British government, taken in 1807, to abolish the slave trade. Not only did the British government prohibit its own subjects from participating in the slave trade, it also put pressure on other nations to take similar action. To enforce its intentions, the British government stationed a naval squadron on the coast of West Africa, with orders to intercept any continuing slave transports. Although the number of slaves exported continued to rise for at least another two decades,<sup>110</sup> tens of thousands of slaves were 'recaptured' (as the contemporary expression went) by the British. As it was considered impractical to return them to their places of origin, they were transported to the colony of Sierra Leone, where recaptured slaves originating from all over West Africa were resettled. Prominently among them was, according to a contemporary, 'the Igbo race, who are in Freetown both numerous and wealthy'.<sup>111</sup> According to 1848 figures on the ethnic origins of recaptives, out of a total number of 13,273 recaptives, 1231 (9%) were classified as Igbo. This

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<sup>107</sup> Robert Needham Cust, *A Sketch of the Modern Languages of Africa* 2 vols (London 1883) 223.

<sup>108</sup> Shirley Ardener, 'Biographical note' in: J. Clarke, *Specimens of Dialects: Short Vocabularies of Languages: and Notes of Countries and Customs in Africa* (Berwick-upon-Tweed 1848; reprinted Oxford 1972) 3-12.

<sup>109</sup> Clarke, *Specimens of Dialects* 36 and 80 (on Bretshi), 42 and 85 (on Grou), 56 and 94 (on Oyo).

<sup>110</sup> Northrup, 'The compatibility of the slave and palm oil trades' 358.

<sup>111</sup> William Balfour Baikie, *Narrative of an Exploring Voyage up the Rivers Kwóra and Bínue Commonly Known as the Niger and Tsádda in 1854* (London 1966, first published 1856) 374.

made them the second largest group in Sierra Leone, after the Yoruba (7114).<sup>112</sup>

In Sierra Leone, the recaptives were taught English by missionaries from British churches, who were directly involved with the resettlement of the liberated Africans. The design was that the missions would station a missionary in each quarter and in every village, erect a church or chapel, and found a school where the children were obliged to take classes. As a result, many of the recaptives converted to Christianity. Among the recaptives a Europeanized middle class developed of lawyers, clergymen, traders, and doctors, which became characteristic of Sierra Leone, although it constituted only a small part of the total population.<sup>113</sup> People of 'Igbo descent' were present among the middle class. They included a number of well-known traders, but also civil servants and professionals.<sup>114</sup>

Nineteenth-century Sierra Leone, with its up-to-date Western educated elite, proved a fertile base for the development of indigenous ideas on the emancipation of African populations and the future development of Africa.<sup>115</sup> It also served as the greenhouse for a number of West-African ethnic groups, among them the Igbo and Yoruba.<sup>116</sup> As a result of the fact that former slaves from a number of different areas were confronted with each other, certain common traits of groups originating from the same area became accentuated. Many Africans who were members of one group in Sierra Leone, would have regarded themselves as belonging to different groups in their regions of origin. Members of groups which had no bond with each other (or who were even at war), started to recognise shared elements: a religion (in the case of Muslims) or related languages. For a while, this tendency was supported by the government's policy to house people from the same region in their own neighbourhoods. But even when this policy changed, the several groups remained inclined to live in their own villages. Several 'benefit societies' emerged, which supervised ethical behaviour and supported orphans, widows, and sick people. The fact that one of the first societies was directed at soldiers in the colonial army,<sup>117</sup> shows that these societies were not necessarily organised along ethnic or national lines. But often they were, and around 1860 a specific Igbo organisation was in operation.<sup>118</sup>

However, it is rather unclear on what grounds the Igbo were distinguished—or distinguished themselves—from the other freed slaves. In his *Polyglotta Africana* Koelle noted that

In Sierra Leone certain natives who have come from the Bight are called 'Ibos. In speaking to some of them respecting this name, I learned that they never had heard it till they came to Sierra Leone. In their own country they seem to have lost their general national name, like the

<sup>112</sup> Curtin, *The Atlantic Slave Trade* 245.

<sup>113</sup> Isichei, *A History of the Igbo People* 69-70; J. H. Kopytoff, *A Preface to Modern Nigeria. The 'Sierra Leonians' in Yoruba, 1830-1890* (Madison 1965) 32.

<sup>114</sup> Robert W. July, *The Origins of modern African Thought* (London 1968) 133.

<sup>115</sup> July, *The Origins of Modern African Thought, passim*; Basil Davidson, *The Black Man's Burden. Africa and the Curse of the Nation-State* (London 1992) 25-27.

<sup>116</sup> Peel, 'The cultural work of Yoruba ethnogenesis'.

<sup>117</sup> Samuel Abraham Walker, *The Church of England Mission in Sierra Leone; Including an Introductory Account of that Colony, and a Comprehensive Sketch of the Niger Expedition in the year 1841* (London 1847) xix; Christopher Fyfe, *A History of Sierra Leone* (London 1962) 138, 170-171.

<sup>118</sup> Austin Ahanotu, 'The role of ethnic unions in the development of Southern Nigeria: 1916-66' in: Boniface I. Obichere, ed., *Studies in Southern Nigerian History* (London 1982) 173.

Akus, and know only the names of their respective districts or countries.<sup>119</sup>

But where for the Yoruba (Aku) at least a contemporary explanation exists for the origin of the name, and a criterion for inclusion in the group (mode of salutation), this is not the case for the Igbo. Koelle, being a linguist, focused on the Igbo language, of which he provided examples of five dialects (based on information from five informants). He furthermore provided the names of fifteen 'countries' which were called Igbo in Sierra Leone, but, Koelle conceded, they did not themselves use that name.<sup>120</sup>

Thus initially in Sierra Leone the ethnonym 'Igbo' was a category used by outsiders, rather than the name that was recognized by the people thus labelled. There was, furthermore, a clear link with the use of the word during the slave trade. The 1848 list of ethnic origins of recaptives in Sierra Leone, for example, has under 'Bight of Biafra' the same groups as are found in eighteenth century slave import figures relating to American colonies.<sup>121</sup> In practice the term 'Igbo' was reserved to those freed slaves who had been exported from the Bight of Biafra and whose origins could not be traced to one of the known coastal groups. Later, it became the name that was applied to their descendants. Thus in Sierra Leone descent from known Igbo, rather than observable criteria such as language, became the criterium for the definition of Igbo.

#### ***2.4 Maps and competing ethnonyms***

During the nineteenth century, after centuries of trade with the coastal communities, Europeans began to develop an interest in the interior for both commercial and humanitarian reasons. The interior was of commercial interest to those traders who wanted to avoid the delta middlemen and trade directly with the producers in the interior, while the humanitarians proposed to wipe out the slave trade at its roots in the interior. These two aims could be combined, as, next to christianization, the replacement of slave trade with an equally profitable legitimate trade was considered a prerequisite to the successful abolition of slavery. In 1830, the Lander brothers were the first Europeans to explore the interior, proving that the delta was actually the mouth of the river Niger, and visiting—briefly, as prisoners—the 'Eboe country' (in actual fact the town of Aboh, on the top of the delta).<sup>122</sup> Subsequent commercial expeditions to the interior took place during the 1830s, followed by a humanitarian expedition in 1841. The Igbo living in the interior constituted one of the groups in which the Europeans were interested.

The often vague or incorrect knowledge created by these explorations had considerable impact upon later perceptions of the area, as it was through these explorations that the ethnonym Igbo was placed on the maps of West Africa. Apart from their purposes of inspection of the area and of trade, the expeditions were attempts at inscription. By putting

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<sup>119</sup> Koelle, *Polyglotta Africana* 7.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibidem*, 8.

<sup>121</sup> Curtin, *The Atlantic Slave Trade* 188-194, 225.

regions on a map, and native words on a list, explorers laid the foundations for colonial power. Of course, when these expeditions took place Britain had yet no intention of turning the area into a colony or protectorate. However, the trading companies that controlled the river Niger from the 1880s onwards, and, after 1900, the colonial administrators, made extensive use of the descriptions and maps that were generated by the explorers.<sup>123</sup> Therefore it can be argued, as Johannes Fabian did when he discussed the Belgian Congo, that explorers exercised a subtle form of power, the power to name, to describe, and to classify.<sup>124</sup>

It cannot be argued, however, that these descriptions were wholly European products. In this period, Europeans looking for Igboland were no longer restricted to the descriptions relating to the slave trade, but could also get information from the Igbo in Sierra Leone (and Fernando Po). In this context, the contact between Europeans and their informants was facilitated by the fact that the latter had acquired many European habits, were fluent in English (the lingua franca in Sierra Leone) and were often Christians. The fact that these informers had themselves never visited the Igbo area, or if they had, had only heard the term Igbo for the first time after arriving in Sierra Leone, did not damage the impression that information obtained from these Igbo was very reliable. William Balfour Baikie, a naval doctor who led an expedition to the Niger and Benue rivers in 1854, mentioned in his report that although he had continuously enquired after the Igbo during the expedition (almost always without success), he had acquired most of his knowledge concerning the Igbo in Sierra Leone and Fernando Po.<sup>125</sup> The Igbo were nevertheless confidently marked on the map that was drawn in 1856 on the basis of Baikie's observations. According to the map, the eastern boundary of the Igbo area was formed by the Cross River and the peoples living along that river. To the south, the area was bounded by the delta and the coastal trading states that were well-known to the Europeans. The delta was of course the mouth of the river Niger which Baikie had ascended. Although he had difficulty finding people who would admit to being Igbo, Baikie knew that for part of the journey to the north, both sides of the river were inhabited by Igbo. However, according to Baikie the Igbo area could not extend far to the west, because he knew that the kingdom of Benin and (further to the northwest) the Yoruba were located there. The northern boundary, finally, was formed by the muslim groups, because the recaptured slaves in Sierra Leone had told the Europeans that the Igbo were non-Islamic. Along the river Benue, which flows from east to west and flows into the Niger to the north of the Igbo area, Baikie encountered Muslim peoples, which led him to conclude that the Igbo area could not extend that far north. The area in the middle, that had not been visited by Europeans, had to be the Igbo area, and it was thus indicated on the map.

In 1857, a regular steamer service on the river Niger—subsidized by the British government—was inaugurated, which initially faced opposition from the delta traders, who mounted

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<sup>122</sup> Robin Hallett, ed., *The Niger Journal of Richard and John Lander* (London 1965) 249.

<sup>123</sup> This has been described in more general terms in: Jan Vansina, 'The ethnographic account as a genre in Central Africa', *Paideuma* 33 (1987) 433-444; there 437.

<sup>124</sup> Johannes Fabian, *Language and Colonial Power. The Appropriation of Swahili in the former Belgian Congo 1880-1938* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and Oxford 1986) 24.

<sup>125</sup> Baikie, *Narrative of an Exploring Voyage*.

cannon and drove long wooden posts into the river-bed to barricade the waterway.<sup>126</sup> In the same year, the first mission station was opened by the Church Missionary Society (CMS), and trading companies opened their first trading posts. For a long time, both the mission and the trading companies restricted their activities to the banks of the river Niger. From their stations, they continued the project of mapping the area which the earlier expeditions had started. The first missionaries were explicitly asked to collect the names of the 'tribes and countries around you,' and to ascertain as much as possible their relative positions to each other, as well as their distance.<sup>127</sup> In this way, they aided in determining who were Igbo, and who were not. During this pre-colonial period, however, the contribution of missionary enquiries to the knowledge of the extent of the Igbo area and its boundaries was limited, as they hardly penetrated the area.

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<sup>126</sup> H. Temperley, *White Dreams, Black Africa. The Antislavery Expedition to the Niger 1841-1842* (New Haven and London 1991) 173; C. C. Ifemesia, *Southeastern Nigeria in the 19th Century* (New York and Lagos 1978) 40; Letter Samuel Crowther in the *Proceedings of the Church Missionary Society for Africa and the East* 61 (1859-1860) 56.

<sup>127</sup> Samuel Crowther and John Christopher Taylor, *The Gospel on the Banks of the Niger. Journals and Notices of the Native Missionaries Accompanying the Niger Expedition of 1857-1859* (London 1859) 37.

On the Niger, the few Sierra Leone missionaries of Igbo ancestry were not recognized as Igbo by the local people and regarded as foreigners. Nor did the missionaries feel they had much in common with the people they encountered. Having been educated by British missionaries, they considered themselves to be 'black Englishmen', and looked down upon the 'primitive' local people. John Christopher Taylor, a Sierra Leone missionary of Igbo descent, wrote in his diary that 'I am now left alone to dwell in the midst of heathens who are deeply sunk in idolatry. O my God, shield, comfort, and support me!'<sup>128</sup> He also wrote that he addressed the Igbo population on behalf of 'our beloved Queen', and tried to convince them of 'British love and affection towards the Ibos.'<sup>129</sup> The Sierra Leoneans working for the trade companies similarly regarded themselves (and were regarded by the locals) as foreigners. One reason for this may have been that the majority of the Sierra Leoneans who came to the area did not have an Igbo background.<sup>130</sup>

Although the missionaries claimed that their first station, Onitsha, was situated in Iboland, and that its population was Igbo, the Onitsha people repeatedly told the missionaries that they were not Igbo at all.<sup>131</sup> In 1908 the missionary Frances M. Dennis noted that the Igbo

seem to divide themselves up into three sections: the Ika, on the western bank of the Niger, despising greatly the Ibos on the eastern side, denying strongly their relationship to the Ibo, and using the term Ibo for a slave; the Ibos between Onitsha and the Cross River, despising the Isus as much as they themselves are despised by the Ikas, proud to call themselves Ibos; and the Isus, who occupy the northern parts of Iboland.<sup>132</sup>

### *Competing ethnonyms*

Tracing the history of the ethnonym 'Igbo' has proved to be revealing, although at the same time confusing, since over the centuries the term was not applied to one single, clearly defined group. The Igbo who were described during the slave trade were not the same people as the Igbo of the missionaries. Although in each case the ethnonym referred to people originating from the area around the lower Niger, in a sense, everybody referred to his own Igbo. Within the area, the term was used, at least by some, as a term indicating 'other' groups, outsiders or slaves.

The focus on the history of the ethnonym 'Igbo' should not obscure the fact that many groups in the area were also (sometimes primarily) known by other ethnonyms. For example, there were the names of the smaller units which, taken together, constitute the total Igbo group. These groups could be known under different names. The people who called themselves the Diobu were called Gbrini by others, *gbrini* being an equivalent of 'people who live in the

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<sup>128</sup> *Ibidem*, 248.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibidem*, 252, 301.

<sup>130</sup> E. A. Ayandele, *The Educated Elite in the Nigerian Society* (Ibadan 1974) 12.

<sup>131</sup> Samuel Crowther in the *Church Missionary Intelligencer and Record* (September 1876) 536; see also his letter in the *Church Missionary Intelligencer* (February 1873) 49.

<sup>132</sup> Frances M. Dennis, 'Iboland, Southern Nigeria', *Church Missionary Review* (July 1908) 407.

bush'.<sup>133</sup> There were also the names of areas within the Igbo area, such as Onitsha, Nkwere or Aro. The latter were again called Inokun by the Efik and some other groups on the Cross River.<sup>134</sup> Calabar had long standing trade relations with the Aro, whom they did not consider to be Igbo. When the Aro began to define themselves as Igbo, this was greeted with surprise by at least some of their old allies, and interpreted as a form of betrayal.<sup>135</sup> An even more complex case is that of the Ika, whose status of has continued to be a matter for debate ever since their first rejection of the ethnonym Igbo as documented by missionaries around 1900. After their initially denying all relationship to the Igbo at the beginning of the colonial period, at later periods—until the Biafra conflict—the Ika often emphasized their relationship to the Igbo. However, in the villages a distinction between Igbo and Ika was maintained.<sup>136</sup> As late as 1939, the Agbor Patriotic Union claimed that, apart from language, the Ika have everything in common with the Yoruba and the Edo.<sup>137</sup> The same has happened to other groups such as the Ikwerre. During the colonial period, the Ikwerre group was divided internally about the question of whether they were Igbo or not, although they were classified as such by the colonial administration.<sup>138</sup> However, they did not use the ethnonym 'Igbo' for the other Igbo groups but called them 'Isomas', a derogatory term meaning, they claimed, 'something less than a citizen'.<sup>139</sup> Since the Civil War, the Ikwerre and other groups have again presented themselves as separate ethnic groups with their own languages, related to—but not part of—Igbo.<sup>140</sup>

Finally, there were the names which outsiders used, and which are thought to have referred to the people who now carry the ethnonym Igbo, such as 'Opu' (presumably an Igala word for Igbo) or Inyamera. It is often argued that the abusive Northern term Inyamera only developed during the twentieth century, after the expression used by Igbo railway workers to ask for water ('Nye m miri'),<sup>141</sup> but it also has another—possibly older—connotation of cannibalism.<sup>142</sup> Initially, Europeans also applied the ethnonym 'Ibo' to the people who are

<sup>133</sup> PRO; CO 957 35 Memorandum by the Chiefs of Diobu to the Minorities Commission. Signed 28 November 1957 by chief Victor Amadi Oparala, chief Sundat Nsiegbé, and Azubuiké Iwezor.

<sup>134</sup> J. Okoro Ijoma, 'The British encounter with the Aro' in: J. Okoro Ijoma, ed., *Arochuku History and Culture* (Enugu 1986) 139-165; there 145, 162.

<sup>135</sup> A. Basse, *Ibo State Union boycott order of 7th November 1956* (Calabar n.d.) 19.

<sup>136</sup> RHO; Mss.Afr.s.413 Hedley Herbert Marshall, Intelligence Report on Ika (1931) 34.

<sup>137</sup> NAI; AGBORDIST.1 AG 219 A. E. Iduwe, President Agbor Patriotic Union, Northern Nigeria Branch, to the Nigerian Government, Baro Station, 19 January 1939.

<sup>138</sup> I discuss this in more detail in chapter 6 (section 6.3).

<sup>139</sup> PRO CO 957 35 The Memorandum Submitted to the Minorities Commission by the Ikwerre State Assembly Both Home and Abroad. Signed I.S. Onwuchekwa, secretary.

<sup>140</sup> Kay R. M. Williamson, Linguistic Research in the Ikwere Language. Paper presented at the Seminar on Ikwere History and Development, January 6-7, 1989. In 'The Lower Niger Languages', *Oduma Magazine* 1.1 (1973), Williamson for the first time suggested that these 'dialects' be regarded as separate languages related to Igbo. This notion was fiercely attacked by Igbo linguists and anthropologists, but seems to have gained general acceptance.

<sup>141</sup> See for example: Isaac Olawale Albert, Urban migrant settlements in Nigeria: A historical comparison of the 'saboron garis' in Kano and Ibadan 1893-1991 (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Ibadan 1994) 144, note 2; Barrie Sharpe mentioned the use of the term 'miyameri' for Igbo in Turuma and other Kauru Hills languages during the 1980s. Sharpe's informants told him that it meant 'give me water' in Igbo and in illustration, people would put their hand to their mouth like a cup (Barrie Sharpe, personal communication).

<sup>142</sup> When I first read Samsom Amali's statement that the term also means 'people who eat human flesh' (see his *Ibos and their fellow Nigerians* (Ibadan 1967) 5), I was rather sceptical about this explanation. However, now that I have come across it more often, I must conclude that it at least reflects an opinion commonly held in the North about the Igbo.

nowadays called the Ibibio. The categorization as Igbo was not readily accepted by the Ibibio themselves, but this was not the reason why the Europeans changed their opinion. Rather, it was the recognition that the Ibibio spoke a language that was entirely different from the Igbo, that forced the Europeans to regard them as a separate group.<sup>143</sup>

What thus becomes very clear from this chapter's concern with a search for origins in the form of the use of an ethnonym or the Igbo area's pre-colonial societies, is that there is no clear Igbo social or cultural unit that can be classified as Igbo. Rather, the societies and developments discussed in this chapter show a multitude of possible origins and elements, providing a rich library for twentieth century observers. Many of those elements did not play a role in the later development of a shared Igbo cultural identity. Other possible origins and elements contributed to this development, by providing a direction or a basis for this development, while many more were later 'recruited' as origins by anthropologists and Igbo nationalists. These developments will be described in the subsequent chapters.

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It would also fit Murray Last's observation that terms such as 'Nam-nam' and 'Lam-lam' occurred in Arabic sources as names of non-Moslem peoples, and also his careful suggestion that 'Lam-lam' might derive from a phrase meaning 'cannibals' (Last, 'The early kingdoms of the Nigerian savanna', 178 note 36, 202 note 128).

<sup>143</sup> Forde and Jones, *The Ibo and Ibibio-Speaking Peoples* 9. The impact of the Europeans' tendency to equate language and ethnic group is described in more detail (including more particulars about the Ibibio case) in chapter 4 below. I mention the relation between Igbo and Ibibio in the context of colonial administration in chapter 6.