

AFIGBO AND THE CHALLENGES OF IGBO SCHOLARSHIP: ISSUES AND PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract

This study critically examines the contributions of a Historian, Adiele Afigbo to Igbo scholarship; highlighting the challenges and complexities associated with researching Igbo history and culture. Afigbo, a pioneering figure in African historiography, addressed numerous issues such as the distortion of Igbo history during colonial rule, the marginalization of Igbo perspectives in broader Nigerian and African narratives, and the methodological difficulties of reconstructing pre-colonial history from oral traditions. The research delves into the thematic and historiographical concerns Afigbo raised, including the underrepresentation of Igbo culture in academia, the debates around ethnic identity and nationalism, and the challenges of balancing indigenous knowledge systems with Western historical frameworks. By analyzing Afigbo's works and the subsequent discourse they generated, this study explores the enduring relevance of his scholarship in contemporary debates on African history and the continuous struggle to authentically represent the Igbo people within the broader Nigerian state. The study also offers perspectives on how these challenges can be addressed, advocating for a more inclusive and multidisciplinary approach to Igbo studies.

Keywords: Historiography, Igbo-history, Culture, Oral-history

Introduction

Prof. Afigbo is a Nigerian Historian. He was born on November 22, 1937 at Ihube autonomous community, Isikwuato, Abia State. He attended Methodist Central School Ihube, 1944-1951: St. Augustine's Grammar School Nkwere in Orlu Division 1958-1960.' On completion of his Secondary School, he gained admission into the University of Ibadan in 1960. There, he met remarkable scholars noted for their brilliance and beneficent influence. They were: J. D. Omer Cooper, J. C. Anene, J. F. Ade Ajayi, and K. O. Dike. There were also his colleagues; Obaro Ikime and Philip Igbafe who not only studied history with him but went on to pioneer made-in-Nigeria Ph.D., at the university of Ibadan with the help of postgraduate scholarship awarded by the university for the best graduating students. Afigbo had not only come on top of his class at the B.A. levels but also was the first of these colleagues to finish his Ph.D. and thus the first to receive Ph.D. from an Indigenous Nigerian university. This is the major reason why some of his friends refer to him as a 'National Specimen'.

Professor Afigbo came from a background that laid less emphasis on ethnicity. Even after the Nigerian civil war, his position did not change. Prof. Afigbo was made a Historian by the men and forces that in the 1950s, gave birth to the celebrated Ibadan School of History which for about three decades was the most prominent school of History in Africa. He developed to become a prominent member of that school which devoted his time to preaching and demonstrating the possibility of the necessity for African History and Historiography as a specific genre of the world branch of knowledge known as History.

In pursuing the mission of this school, through teaching, research, writing and publication, Afigbo produced a wide variety of works which established inter alia the possibility of basic deconstructionist history of African historical methodologies and the close link between the art and sciences of history on the one hand and state formation and state craft on the other.³ In the process, he gave full rein to elitism with respect to sources and methods using as the occasion demands and warrants elements and other oral sources from archaeology, linguistics, artifacts and written source.

Prof. Afigbo is a career Lecturer who lectured in many Universities listed below:

- i. Department of History University of Ibadan, 1964-1966.
- ii. Department of History and Archaeology University of Nigeria, Nsukka 1966-1970, 1974-1975,
- iii. 1977-1980, 1983-1992, Avan Ikoku college of Education 1992-1997.
- iv. Department of History Abia State University 1997-2003.
- v. Department of History and International Relations, Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki 2004-2009.

Afigbo and Igbo Historiography

Prof. Afigbo believes that the best chroniclers of Igbo history and culture would be Igbo themselves both scholars and non-scholars. He gives an impression of a people whose identity is under siege, embattled by negative stereotypes portraying them as anarchic, materialistic and belligerent. He believes that the progression of this view point has led to the assumption that ethnic identity for the Igbo is a negative influence that ought to be suppressed for a group of people often seen as scapegoat for much larger problems. He believes that the key to better understanding of the Igbo vis-a-vis other Nigerian ethnic groups lies in a greater understanding of the Igbo History and cultural traditions at both the academic and popular levels Afigbo thus reinterpreted Igbo history and culture on its own terms. He also makes effort to compare the history and culture of the Igbo to other world culture, noting remarkable similarities that have to date been overshadowed by negative obsession with Igbo differences. The reorientation of Igbo history and culture in Afigbo's works put the records straight and also has practical implications. He insists that integration between modernization and tradition must occur for the Igbo to become politically and economically formidable. Afigbo is primarily concerned with the poor state of research into the history and culture of Igbo society and this has allowed negative images of the Igbo to be developed and perpetuated over time. Commenting on Afigbo's works on the Igbo, Prof. Ogbu Kalu has argued that Afigbo remains the leading historian of the Igbo people even if he postures his practice of the art within the National framework. Collections of his essays on Igbo history and society consists of his persistent efforts to tell the story of an ethnic group without sounding parochial to wave a tapestry of their past that is not as brittle as making a rope with sand. Each is a cameo that portrays one diversion or the other.

Afigbo has toiled to show that oral traditions could serve oral historiography and would be used to construct the origins of communities without conflicting myth with history Afigbo insist that the Igbo constitute an interesting case study because they did not form a state.⁵ His seminar contribution is to trace the path of Igbo origin through Igboukwu art and turn a searchlight on the Niger-Benue confluence and genetic data. Afigbo believes strongly in the inter-disciplinary approach to historical reconstruction when he argues that the migratory history of the Igbo that occurred 6,000 years ago could be reconstructed by using sources from geography, climatology, Geology, Palynology and Ecology that probe reality. There is no doubt that all these essays are contributions to African historiography based on a new consciousness. ⁶ With these essays, Afigbo revives the image of Igboland painted by the various categories of colonial government, officers and missionaries.

Commenting on Afigbo's contribution to Igbo history. Professor Onwuka Njoku has written that Afigbo has written on the Igbo people, her history and culture more than any other scholar dead or living. He has inspired scores of other scholars into Igbo studies and suggested to them profitable

areas of research. Professor Afigbo founded the Ikenga Journal, Ikoro Bulletin and the Obi Journal. This is eloquent testimonies of Afigbo as a moving spirit in Igbo studies.

Afigbo's internalistic approach to the study and understanding of Igbo history is instructive and worthy of emulation. He has greatly extended and deepened any person who reads his collections. However, Prof. Njoku noted that not all will agree with Afigbo's view points. For instance, some may contest the statements that Igala and Benin influences in parts of Igbo land were "pushed at the point of sword" and through Military terrorism" and that the Igbo have abandoned "Western Education". In addition, the claim that it was greed that drove the Igbo to economic ventures outside their homeland could also be contested.

Professor R. C. Njoku is of the opinion that Afigbo is unarguably one of the most erudite African Historian whose work has immensely contributed to filling up some of the voids in Igbo historical past. Prof. Afigbo is recognized nationally and internationally with Editorial and Advisory Board's membership in the:

- i. Journal of Historical Society of Nigeria (1965-1967).
- ii. Institute of African Studies (1970-1971)
- iii. Journal of African History (198- -1984)
- iv. Journal of the International African Institute, London. (1984-1985)
- v. Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History from 1990-2009.

Afigbo's scholarship cuts across studies in oral traditions and cultural history, Igbo women' Religion, Migration, Philosophy, Warfare and Weaponry, Trade and Routes, Industry and Arts, a aspects of Colonial History, Federalism, Rural and National Development etc. It is appropriate to state that there is no work on any aspect of Igbo history, inter-alia in the broad field of African studies that can afford to totally ignore Afigbo's intellectual ideas. He has contributed much to salvaging Igbo history from dark images of the past.

Prof Afigbo debunks the oriental hypothesis which was once employed to explain the evolution of Igbo culture and insist that it tells us nothing about the event even though it might be a useful ideology for satisfying non historical needs. Afigbo argues that a study of the interaction between the Igbo and their environment, between them and their human neighbours throw better light on the Igbo culture history. This suggests that after separating from their Kwa sub group somewhere around the Niger Benue confluence, the Igbo settled first on the northern Igbo where they evolved their characteristic culture. He went on to explain that due to pressure of population, some of them left along their own lines while retaining the basic Igbo speech and culture. It was this dispersal that brought the Igbo into contact with the Edo, Ijo, Ibibio and other peoples whom they borrowed

certain socio and political institutions, items of material culture and ideas. Regional trade developed early in Igbo culture partly because of the failure of agriculture on the northern plateau and partly due to mineral resources.

Afigbo argues that though it must be emphasized that Igbo culture resulted from the workings of Igbo spirit or genius on its environment it must also be remembered that the Igbo did not live in isolation. Available evidence shows that the Igbo were closely linked with their neighbours whom they influenced and who influenced them equally. Of all these influences, the Edo kingdom of Benin and the Igala state of Idah would appear to have had the most far reaching impact on the evolution of Igbo culture. The influence of Benin was most felt in the western Igbo area of Onitsha, and Aboh especially in their dialect and material culture. The impact of Ibibio, Ijo and Cross River on the Igbo could be best seen in the social institutions as the secret society and the age grade organization of the Eastern and Ngwa-igbo.

Many of Afigbo's books and articles provide important examples of how reassessment of widely held assumption about Igbo society can lead to a new interpretation that paints a more balanced picture of the Igbo in relation to other Nigerian and world peoples. However, Afigbo did not pretend to have provided all the answers to the numerous hard questions surrounding Igbo identity. For instance, he acknowledges that further archaeological research is needed to firmly support his conclusions on the origins and culture history. He also identifies a number of nagging questions without precise answers:

- i. Had Igbo society always been as "primitive" as the British found it in 1900"
- ii. Was it that the Igbo once came under the influence of some alien culture carriers who, by inter-breeding with them, gave rise to the Aro, Nri, Awka, Nkwere and Abiriba? Or did these communities rise simultaneously from Igbo society.

Afigbo and Beyond Igbo History and Their Neighbours

Toyin Falola and Matthew Heaton described Professor Afigbo as truly a giant of Nigerian studies. They maintain that he has influenced a generation of scholars across the inter-disciplinary horizon of liberal arts through his pioneering works. According to them, his essays offer perspective relevant to many social science fields economics, sociology, anthropology, education etc. Commenting on these characteristics in his writing, Professor Afigbo states: As historians, we believe that the best way is to know how it began, what factors dictated its origin and what factors dictate its development, as well as where it is heading. If you find it is headed in the wrong direction, and you are a reformer or do-gooder, you can try to redirect it. But if it proves obstinate, you can decapitate it and try growing a new head.

Afigbo believes that mere knowledge of the philosophy, structure and dynamics of any particular phenomenon may be a good addition to knowledge generally, but it is no substitute for knowledge of where it is coming from, where it is and where it is going. This latter knowledge is historical

knowledge and helps to explain why history is the queen of the non-exact sciences. This need to trace the root causes of problems through historical methods, rather than simply ameliorate the symptoms through policy orientation, is the central theses of most of Afigbo's works.

In his works on Nigeria, Afigbo sees historical understanding as a factor in the improvement of the political, economic and social conditions. His essays on Nigeria can be divided into four; The Precolonial, Transition to Colonial, Colonial, and Independent Nigeria. Afigbo suggests that solutions to Nigeria's development problem must take a much broader scope than constitutional reforms. He also believes that the Nigerian government has the power to affect these transformations in the consciousness of Nigerians.

However, one of his best students, Professor Ayodeji Olukoju insist that it is rather unfortunate that Professor Afigbo never managed to deliver an inaugural lecture before leaving UNN, despite his evident towering credentials. Moreover, Afigbo's erudition and capacity for painstaking research and analysis have not been reflected in the production of academic successors, in the form of graduate students that he successfully nurtured to carry on the struggle which has yet to be won.

Professor Afigbo is an encyclopedia of sort; he has ability to analyze problem beyond the pale of the average historian in a cross-disciplinary setting and a firm grasp of issues. His treatment of issues is magisterial and hardly tainted by partisanship or biases. Professor Afigbo has broken free of the rigid approach of History based on European conceptions and adopted by most historians of Nigeira. Afigbo believes that first step can be taken towards an Africa more in tune with its own needs capable of contributing to the dialogue of world civilization. But Afigbo does more than abstract theorizing on the steps needed to advance the study of History in Nigeria in order to improve its local and global position. He has also spent much of his academic life practicing what he preaches. Professor Afigbo had dedicated a large chunk of work to issues in local history as well as the social, economic and cultural history of Nigeria or parts of Nigeria and its link to National unity and interdisciplinary.

Afigbo has a passion for local history; this can be shown "the idea of Igbo History" in which he gives an up-to-date account of the Historiography of the Igbo of Southern Nigeria.

In his treatment, Afigbo pushes for the establishment of a history curriculum that emphasizes Pan-Nigerian history in "Myth, History and National Orientation in Nigeria". Afigbo is known for creative use of sources to develop historical interpretation. This can be seen in his work "Textile Art, Culture and History in Southern Nigeria". He focuses on the socio-economic and cultural history of the masses.

Afigbo proves that valuable information can be gleaned from locally centered socio- economic histories of Nigerian people and this information can be used in the development of Nigerian project. He made attempts to improve the image of Nigeria in the wider world through making Nigeria contribuie to the understanding of world civilization. Prof. Afigbo promotes national unity

through historical analysis in his works on Southern Nigeria, the Niger-Benue confluence and the Benue in pre-colonial period and some issues of Historiography.

Afigbo ranks second to none in his mastery of Igbo historiography. He has made great attempts towards the continuing recovery and better understanding of the History and culture of his people of Southeastern Nigeria and Nigeria in general.

Afigbo's consistent nationalist brand of historiography like those of B. Ogot of Kenya, Adu, Boahen of Ghana etc., serves to remind younger generation of Africanist scholars about unfinished cause of rescuing African history from imperial distortion.

In many of his publications, he sought to use the particular to illuminate the universal, and the universal to illuminate the particular. For instance, he used a detailed study of the textile process in Southern Nigeria to throw much helpful light on the socio-cultural dynamics of the region. In a similar manner, he used the rise and expansion of the pre-colonial great states such as Benin to show that the so-called mini-states of pre-colonial Africa are, among other things, fossilized reminders of the conditions from which the great states arose.

Afigbo broke away from the action react, on thesis: that ruled the new African historiography when he joined the History profession. He did so by emphasizing the study of people and their cultures in their own right instead of the other way around. He saw the study of inter-group relations as a fruitful approach to understanding pre-colonial African society

His essays on Nigerian History provide an insight into how Afigbo sees the history of his country from the pre-colonial period right up to the turn of the 21st century. His works show why Afigbo sees historical understanding as a factor in the improvement of the political, economic and social conditions of Nigeria.

Afigbo's works like: The Benue Valley in the Pre-colonial Nigerian History, Southeastern Nigeria in the 19th Century; The Cross River Region in the Pre-colonial Era: External Contacts and Relations, The Diplomacy of Small-scale states: A Case Study from Southeastern Nigeria; and Trade and Politics on the Cross River, 1885-1905 are situated squarely in the ISP century, before the consolidation of British power in West Africa. With these essays, Prof. Afigbo attempts to construct an image of the political, economic and social makeup of various geographical regions of modern day Nigeria.

Afigbo made contributions to Nigerian History when he wrote essays like Ralph Moor and the Economic Development of Southern Nigeria: 1896-1903, The Consolidation of British Imperial Administration in Nigeria 1900-1918; The Amalgamation: Myths, Howlers and Heresies, Herbert Richmond Palmer and Indirect Rule in Eastern Nigeria: 1900-1950; Lugard in Southeastern Nigeria 1912-1919; The Native Revenue Ordinance in the Eastern Provinces: The Adventures of a Colonial Legislation; and Anthropology and; Colonial Administration in Southeastern Nigeria, 1891-1939.

These works are basically on debates within the colonial administration about how best to govern the Nigerian provinces. He makes attempt to explain the process of implementing indirect rule system, the debates surrounding its efficacy and reasons for failure as a system of administering the various peoples of Nigeria.

Prof Afigbo also has essays that depict the legacy of indirect rule; they focus on the nature of the federal state, ethnic tensions and political crisis in independent Nigeria. The shadow of indirect rule holds sway over all these essays but Prof Afigbo has not heaped all the problems of independent Nigeria on its colonial past. Some of his works like Background to Nigerian federalism: federal features in the colonial state; the nationalities questions in Southern Nigeria during the colonial period; The nationalities question in history, politics and Affairs; Federal character: its meaning and history; History and the Nigerian polity: the case of the 1979 federal constitution. In the shadow of the caliphate: culture and the politics of structure and administration in Nigeria, initiate the reader to some of Afigbo's theoretical positions on how the Nigerian State should be governed.

Prof Afigbo has written several works on contemporary Nigeria. In works like Nigerian politics in the 1980s" A political horoscope for the second republic; Nigeria and the myth of modern democracy, Nigeira's Sociology and Institutional performance: The case of the Public Service; Dark shadows or past policies and administration in contemporary Nigeria; The National Youth Service Corps and the challenges of the fourth republic: towards a culture of peace in Nigeria: popular uprising as a reflection on the legal justice; the burden of duty and press response to regime and volatile issues and developing a new civil society and order for Nigeria: The problem and the prospects.

Afigbo is mostly concerned with demystifying assumptions popular in Nigeria about the country's political and social problems. Therefore, Afigbo plans to put Nigeria on the part of greatness through National education system so as to produce a society of patriotic, responsible and qualified contributors to the national good.

In his works on Nigeria in the pre-colonial period, Afigbo goes to a great length to prove the sophisticated inter-relationships that Nigeria societies had developed before the imposition of British colonial rule in the last decade of the 19th century. Afigbo proposes that the Jukun of what is now North Eastern Nigeria were not in fact, the political and military overlord of a quasi-imperial system containing multitudinous separate ethnic groups, as had previously been believed, but were rather the ritual overlords of the region, holding no direct political or economic control over surrounding areas. With such idea in mind, Afigbo concluded that true nature of social interaction in the Benue valley in 19th century had been "a socio-political continuum with the region to the South of it inhabited by the Ogoja the Effik Ibibio, the Igbo and the Ijo. Afigbo makes a similar point about the social organization of the various peoples of the Southeastern Nigeria in the 21st century. In his discussion of the political and socio-economic order of the societies in Southeastern

Nigeria, he concludes that the people in the region did have autonomous and particularistic local structures.

In Conclusion, it has been shown that Professor Adiele Eberechukwu Afigbo is a Nigerian Historian that worth his salt. His academic background and influences helped to shape him into a scholar of repute in the academia. He is truly the giant of Igbo history and the quality of his works attest to this position. However, some scholars argue that Professor Afigbo has not been able to produce followership in terms of Doctorate candidates who should continue the struggle for the reconstruction of not only Igbo history but Nigeria and African history.

Works By Professor Adiele Ebelechukwu Afigbo

A. Eastern Nigeria Historiography: The Idea of Igbo History

1. Ibibio Origin and Migrations: A Critique of Methodology.
2. Mono-causality and African Historiography: The Case of Effik Society and International Commerce.
3. The "Bini Mirage" and the History of South-Central Nigeria.
4. Oral Tradition and the History of Segmentary Societies.
5. Oral Tradition and Historical Explanation: A Case Study of Central Southern Nigeria.
6. The Anthropology and Historiography of Nigeria Before and Since Igboukwu.
7. War and Historical Expansion in Eastern Nigeria.
8. The Aro Phenomenon in the Historiography and Sociology of Southeastern Nigeria.
9. Oral Tradition and History in Eastern Nigeria
10. Southeastern Nigeria, The Niger-Benue confluence and the Benue in the Pre-Colonial period: Some Issues of Historiography.
11. Ancestral Igbo Religion and Cosmos and the idea of World Religion.

B. Igbo History and Society

1. Towards a History of the Igbo-speaking Peoples of Nigeria.
2. Prolegomena to the Study of the Culture History of the Igbo-speaking Peoples.
3. Our Essential History and us.

4. An Outline of Igbo History.
5. Traditions of Igbo Origins: A Comment.
6. Igbo Genes.
7. The Indigenous Political System of the Igbo
8. Igbo Land Before 1800
9. Igbo Experience: A Prolegomena
10. Igbo Political Leadership: Past, Present and the Future.
11. A History of Igbo Traditional Textile Industry.
12. Some Aspects of the History of Ozo Among the Igbo of Nigeria
13. The age of innocence: The Igbo and Their neighbours in Pre- colonial Times.
14. Religion and Economic Enterprise in traditional Igbo Society.
15. Toward a Study of Weaponry in Pre-colonial Igboland.
16. The Aro Expedition of 1901 -1902 (An episode in the British Occupation of Ibo land).
17. Patterns of Igbo Resistance to British Conquest
18. The Calabar Mission and the Aro Expedition of 1901 -1902
19. The Igbo Under British Rule: Aspects of the Human Dimension. •
20. The Pangs of Social Adjustment: Emancipation Among the Nkanu Igbo, 1907-1924.
21. Chief Igwegbe Odum: The Omenuko of History.
22. Some Aspects of Rural Development in Igboland
23. Time and its Measurement in Igbo Culture
24. The Idea of Igbo Nationality and its Enemies

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Toyin Falola, Ed. (2006). *Myth, History and Society: The Collected Works of Adiele Afigbo*. Eritrea: African World Press.

See, Ogbu Kalu's *Reflections on Igbo History and Society*

See, R.C Njoku. *Comments on Afigbo's Essays on Igbo History*

See *Re-reading Afigbo's Works on Nigeria in Nigerian History, Politics and Affairs*

See *Colonial Historiography: Essays in Honour of Prof J.F Ade Ajayi*