

**Book Review of: "Glimpses of Igbo Culture and Civilization," 293 pgs.
Edited by Okolie Animba, Computer Edge Publishers, Lagos Nigeria, 2000.**

This book is the proceedings from a Pan-Igbo National Seminar and workshop organized by a Cultural Heritage Center in Uwani, Enugu, Nigeria. So its overall academic quality, coherence and so forth are less than one might expect from pure research institutions. Many of the 14 authors are professors from 7 named universities, but some are headmen, chiefs, or other governmental officials. In a similar vein, the printing quality is not the best. However, those reservations noted, this book was a wealth of information on its intended subject, and while the authors were not all 100% pedigreed scholars, they were all very sincerely and earnestly trying to share the essences of Igbo life with a larger world. In that task they succeeded.

The chapters proceed from history, through language and literature, social organization to 'fine and applied arts.' The most interesting chapters to me, and the ones I will use in class, looked at how the Igbo people try to transmit wisdom across the generations. Along the way one encounters some very interesting asides, as when Chibiko Okebalama of Nigeria University in Nsukka observes that "education in Igboland is gradually becoming a woman affair." Some things may be universal across our world of transition.

But first some background. The "Igbo people" are fundamentally a language group with one large division and many smaller ones. They live mainly in southeastern Nigeria and are known to the outside world more for losing the war for an independent "Biafra" against more dominant Hausa and Yoruba language groups, within a Nigerian context that has over 400 dialects and over 30 distinct languages. The weakness of this text is reflected by the fact that there were zero maps in the entire work, and most discussion of the range the Igbo occupy was in terms of this valley or that river watershed rather than things a western eye could easily place on maps without further research.

Another problem it struggles with and notes in the very beginning is that before the British colonialists arrived, the Igbo people were non-literate. So much of the commentary on Igbo culture is necessarily drawn from oral tradition, put into a relatively recent Igbo written language and then translated into English. They did the best they could but this is obviously a difficult problem, and sometimes the real meaning of phrases remains obscure.

That said, the book goes through the limited archaeology of the region, noting dates on pottery and human tools around 3,000 B.C.E. which documents "human activity of considerable antiquity." This section defends the concept of Igbo civilization in an attempt "to contradict here the imperialist view that Igboland had no history or culture worth the name until the establishment of British rule." This defensiveness was not necessary to my eye, but recurs from time to time.

Now, to the chapters on proverbs that interested me most. One was authored by Richard Okafor of the University of Science and Technology in Enugu State, and the other by C. C. Ndulue, Chief of the Abatete group. Each presents the 100 most important proverbs (to them, of course) from either Imezi-Owa (a province of Enugu State where about 25,000 people live) or the larger Abatete group. A quick analysis of these two lists of wisdom proverbs showed about 48 that were equivalents, and 52 which were quite different. Most were presented first in phonetic Igbo, then in literal English translation, and finally in parentheses to clarify meaning.

Some examples from “One Hundred Imezi-Owa Proverbs” by Richard Okafor, pages 64 – 77:

“Eshu e we n’oha agii ne-egbu o”

A cow owned by the community is killed by hunger.
(Everybody’s business is nobody’s business).

“Aka naa anuho ekechitete ngwugwu”

One hand cannot tie a parcel.
(One cannot succeed alone; Humans need each other to make a brighter day).

“A whuho ke-emelu e meek u a whulu”

When the ideal is unattainable, the available should suffice.
(Be content with what you have).

“Oweho oye nii vuho shi n’otune e ya”

There’s not one without some feces in his anus.
(One cannot be so perfect not to make mistakes. No one is a saint. Everyone has a skeleton in his cupboard).

“Egbe belu ugo belu nhu shikwa ibe e ya ebene nku kwa a”

Let the kite perch and let the eagle perch. Anyone who says not, let his wings break.
(Live and let live).

I hope that provides some flavor of this interesting book. Like many nature based groups, Igbo proverbs often use animals and body parts as symbolic imagery to capture more philosophical lessons. Subsequent chapters present many different aspects of Igbo culture and history. Since each was written originally for a symposium, their style and content vary greatly and coherence is weak. But the editor never promised the definitive work about the Igbo people, rather, “Glimpses of Igbo Culture and Civilization. And he provided many for me regarding one of the main language groups in the most powerful nation of West Africa.

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