

# IGBO

## LANGUAGE & CULTURE

The term "Igbo" often denotes community or the inhabited world as in the expression "Igbo bi.a lere" (World or whole community, come see). Igbo language belongs to the Niger-Congo family/ "Benue-Congo" group of languages. It has dozens of geographical dialects and is also surrounded by yet other dozens of closely related Niger-Congo languages. These related language subgroups are: Edoid (in the west), Defoid (in the west and northwest), Idomoid (in the north), Lower Cross (in the east and south), and Ijo (in the south). Igbo is the second most populous indigenous language of southern Nigeria.

It is spoken by about 20 - 25 million people in spite of the fact that about 1 million Igbo speakers died after the two coup d'etat of 1966 and during the civil war of 1967 - 1970. Culturally speaking, the Igbo have adopted education as part of their culture because they saw it as their only "ladder" for survival/prominence in a highly competitive Nigeria and the world. Before 1990, almost every family/extended family had a number of university graduates. Today, almost every family/extended family has a son or daughter overseas. Another important cultural point is that the yam and the kola-nut are two of the most important ingredients in Igboland --both in the motherland and in the Diaspora. The yam signifies the hard-working Igbo who do whatever it takes to earn their living honorably while the kola-nut demonstrates the desire of the Igbo to maintain oneness no matter how far away they are from their homeland. Wherever the Igbo gather, the kola-nut is always used as a symbol of brotherhood and togetherness as signified by their proverb which asks where the finger-nail went that one would say that the kola-nut was not enough to go around (Mbo o gara ole ebe e ji si na oji e zughì?). Also concerning the kola-nut, there is a common saying in Nigeria that the Yoruba grow it, the Hausa eat it, and the Igbo celebrate it!

## STUDYING IGBO IN THE U.S.

Below is a list of some of the universities in the United States that currently offer Igbo. For more information, please contact the National African Language Resource Center, or check the NALRC web site, located at <http://www.nalrc.indiana.edu>.

University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia



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AN IGBO WOMAN IN COMPLETE ATTIRE

NATIONAL AFRICAN LANGUAGE  
RESOURCE CENTER (NALRC)

## WHY STUDY IGBO?

The word “Igbo” is used to describe Igbo territory, its indigenous speakers, and the language spoken by them. It is one of the languages that make up Nigeria’s three major languages, with Hausa/Fulani and Yoruba being the other two. Of the three, Igbo is the least commonly taught even though its original speakers are the most traveled and most spread out both into Nigeria’s most interior parts and into the rest of the world. Igbo is natively spoken only in Igboland located in the eastern region of Nigeria.

With the world developing at such a fast pace in technology, and the Igbo forming a big part of this development, the time is right for this language and its people who have lent impetus to the world, to come into the limelight! Therefore studying Igbo will certainly contribute to the globalization process.

Thus far, Igbo is not used in any international “milieu,” yet its speakers make up a major part of Africa’s and the world’s elites. Fortunately, a few Universities in the United States of America are beginning to offer Igbo so that students can use Igbo to fulfill their language requirements. This way, the world can have a window into this language, its people and culture. Studying Igbo will also help researchers be better prepared for the much needed in-depth study and research that pertain to Igbo language and culture.

It is also interesting to note that in recent years, some Ph.D students have done some research on the Igbo language. Their dissertations are available to help pave the way into resolving some of the many enigmas that surround the history and origin of the Igbo. Also, because Igbo speakers have permeated the world’s societies in many different ways, they have also increased in population by childbirth and marriage. Therefore, there is a great number of Igbo heritage learners who need to be taught their “mother tongue.” Understanding a people’s language and cultural world view helps in understanding what motivates them; and the happenings of September 11, 2001 have shown America and the world that every language group should be thoroughly included into our world’s “global village” and Igbo is a big part of this village!

## WHO SPEAKS IGBO?

### PEOPLE AND HISTORY

The Igbo people number between 20 and 25 million, and they live all over Nigeria since they cannot be accommodated in the original land area that is called Igboland. The Igboland is now situated in seven states of Nigeria (Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, Imo, Rivers and Delta with a variety of dialects that include Ikwere, Etche, Ika and Ibo). There is also a great number of Igbo speaking people in the Diaspora (U.S.A., Canada, Great Britain, Germany, and every part of the world). The Igbo are very highly enterprising, resourceful, and education-minded in nature and have resorted to travel in order to satisfy these quests and to make more room for their ever-growing population. Very early in their history, they established themselves as a hard-working people when they divided themselves into northern and southern Igbo by their work ethics – northern Igbo developed in the hilly areas between Orlu, Awka, and Nsukka after southern Igbo speakers had left to go cultivate the lowland forests that are today’s oil – palm savannah. Also, by the 18th century, a part of the Igbo had identified itself as long-distance traders of foodstuff, ivory, cloth, guns, and slaves.

The Igbo have lived in the southeastern part of Nigeria for a very long time, but because their language and culture had been primarily passed down by oral tradition, there is no written record of how they came to live in that part of Nigeria. Linguists, anthropologists, and other scientists have done some research about the origin of the Igbo, but no one has found out exactly where the Igbo came from. There are many theories and speculations about this topic. A few of them are: that the Igbo were the original settlers of Igboland which started from the core area around Orlu and Owerri and expanded into their present area; that they are related to the “Nri Kingdom;” and that the Igbo are descendants of early Jews because most of their customs and cultural practices are similar to those of the Jews. A few examples are the celebration of the newborn (Omugwo), naming ceremony (Igu aha), marriage ceremonies (Ilu nwaanyi), atoning for accidental killing (Ikwa ochu), and many others.

In all these history/origin enigmas, one thing is sure: no other tribe or people in Nigeria or Africa can testify to the exodus of the Igbo. Neither can any say that the Igbo passed through their land before settling at their present location in the hinterland of Nigeria. Could the Igbo be the Melchizedek of Africa? With no beginning and no end? Extensive research is necessary if any of these questions will be thoroughly answered.



Increasing Igbo speakers’ population by marriage!



Igbo learners getting ready for a trip to Igboland.



Igbo girl dancers celebrate!