

COMPETING NARRATIVES ON THE ORIGIN AND ETHNOGENESIS OF ULI:
A STUDY IN IGBO ORAL SOURCES AND SOCIAL CHARTER

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Abstract

This article examines three principal oral traditions concerning the origin and ethnogenesis of Uli, an Igbo community in Ihiala Local Government Area of Anambra State, Nigeria. Drawing on court testimony, community histories, song, cult practice, and field conversation, it argues that the Njurumuwa fraternal narrative, the autochthonous priestly narrative, and the Ogbu migration-and-covenant narrative are not rival claims awaiting a single historical verdict. They are complementary social charters, each answering a different question that Uli people continue to ask of the past: how kinship and honour are made; how a people belong to land, river, and deity; and how political order is contracted among unequal groups. The analysis is framed by segmentary lineage theory, ethno-symbolism, the idea of the segmentary state, and Malinowski's charter-myth thesis, read through Jan Vansina's insistence that oral tradition is a living historical source rather than a frozen archive. A central finding is contextual: the Ogbu covenant tradition, often muted in printed local histories, becomes the authoritative register in chieftaincy litigation because it alone maps existing offices, kingmaking rights, and claims to the soil. The article contributes to decolonial Igbo historiography by treating indigenous epistemology as theory-producing rather than merely data-providing.

Keywords: Uli; Igbo oral tradition; ethnogenesis; charter myth; segmentary lineage; covenant; Adiele Afigbo; chieftaincy litigation; Anambra State

Introduction

Between 2012 and 2019 I sat, not as a distant fieldworker with a notebook, but as a witness in two related chieftaincy suits at the High Court of the Onitsha Judicial Division—Suit No. HHH/46/2012 and Suit No. HHH/18/2015. The courtroom has a way of stripping a tradition of its poetry and leaving only what can be sworn. What stayed with me was not the heat of the arguments so much as their unexpected unity. Plaintiff and defendant, senior title-holder and junior claimant, all reached for the same story: the coming of Ogbu, the covenants he struck, and the political architecture those covenants were said to have left behind. Yet when I later turned to the books that community historians had written for a reading public—books meant to celebrate Uli rather than to win a case—the Ogbu version receded. Other ancestors stepped forward. Other migrations were rehearsed. Other beginnings were declared ancient.

That discrepancy is the problem this article tries to think through. Why do different versions of the same community's origin appear in different social rooms? What work do they do when they appear? And how should a historian trained to look for contradiction treat a corpus that seems, at first glance, to quarrel with itself? I write these questions as a PhD student in the Department of History and International Studies, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, not as a member of its teaching staff. The article is co-authored with my supervisor, Professor Ifeyinwa Emejulu.

These are not new questions in African historiography. Since Jan Vansina forced the profession to take oral tradition seriously as a source subject to criticism rather than as folklore to be discarded, Africanists have known that a tradition is never only a report on the past.¹ It is also a performance in the present. Bronisław Malinowski, writing from a different continent and a different disciplinary moment, had already named one of the jobs such performances do: they charter institutions. They give a warrant of antiquity to arrangements that would otherwise look like yesterday's compromise.² Among the Igbo, where political authority has long been described as segmentary, titled, and only unevenly monarchical, origin stories do still more. They sort brothers. They explain who holds the *ọfo*. They say who may speak for the soil.³

Uli offers an unusually sharp case. It is small enough to be known from the inside and historically visible enough—through the Biafran airstrip, through a university campus, through a thick local literature—to be misrecognised from the outside. Its four principal quarters, its river cults, its New Yam festival, and its memory of war sit alongside a quieter archive: the songs called Mbele, Abiri, and Arigo; the praise-name *Ojiri Uri ka*; the

covenant language of *Ebem Teghete Uli*; the war-name *Uli egbu ataji*. The town's very name is already an argument, because *uli* (or *uri*) is also the indigo body-art for which Igbo women were famous, a practice whose motifs appear on the ninth-century bronzes of Igbo-Ukwu.⁴ To ask where Uli comes from is therefore to ask, at the same time, how a people name themselves through beauty, kinship, priesthood, contract, and war.

The argument I develop is deliberately modest and, I hope, exact. The three narratives reconstructed here are complementary cultural charters. The Njurumuwa story works in the register of family drama and moral transformation. The autochthonous priestly account works in the register of spiritual rootedness and ecological belonging. The Ogbu narrative works in the register of diplomacy, alliance, warfare, and the legitimation of office. They become "competing" only when a particular arena—above all the law court—demands a single usable past. That is not a defect in Igbo oral culture. It is evidence of its intelligence.

Uli: Place, People, and Historical Situation

Uli occupies the southeastern corner of Ihiala Local Government Area in Anambra State. Its neighbours include Ihiala, Amorka, Amaofuo, Ubulu, Ozara, Egbuoma, and Ohakpu. The settlement stretches westward toward the confluence of the Atamiri and Enyinja rivers and toward Usham Lake and the lower Niger country.⁵ Community estimates place the resident population in the region of nine to ten thousand, organised principally into the quarters of Eziam, Ihite, Umuaku, and Umuoma, with villages and kindreds like Umuagbuchi, Umubazu, Anuebunwa, Ndegungwu and others -nested inside that fourfold frame.⁶

The landscape is not a backdrop. It is one of the protagonists. Riverine fertility has long underwritten yam cultivation and the Iri Ji festival that still gathers the town. Forest and water also hold the cults through which the autochthonous narrative remembers first peoples and later immigrants. Taboo practices around the Atamiri forest, recorded in more recent environmental scholarship, show that ecological restraint in Uli is not a borrowed development slogan; it is an old grammar of respect.⁷ When elders say that river and forest deities "called groups into being," they are not speaking metaphorically in the thin modern sense. They are describing a theory of how skill, office, and settlement become legitimate.

Two later events have given Uli a national silhouette that local origin stories never needed. During the Nigerian Civil War of 1967–1970, engineers of the Republic of Biafra cut an airstrip—remembered as Annabelle—through Uli land. After other airfields fell, that strip became the last major civilian and relief gateway into the secessionist enclave. Night flights, burnt wreckage, and the moral ambiguity of a lifeline built on farmland entered the town's modern memory.⁸ Decades later the Uli campus of Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University (formerly Anambra State University) planted another kind of outside world in the same soil. Neither the airstrip nor the campus created Uli. Both, however, sharpened the town's habit of explaining itself to strangers, and that habit is part of the ecology in which origin narratives now live.

Published local history is already part of the problem under study. Ichie (Sir) G. C. Okonkwo's *URI: History, Life, Culture and Custom of a People* remains the most ambitious community monograph.⁹ Like many town histories written by titled insiders, it gathers genealogy, custom, and civic pride into a single commemorative voice. It does not pretend to be a source-critical ethnography, and it should not be read as one. Its silences—especially around the Ogbu covenant idiom that dominated the Onitsha courtroom—are themselves evidence. A book offered to the town as a mirror and a brief offered to a judge as a weapon do not have the same duties to the past.

Sources, Method, and the Position of the Historian

This study treats oral tradition in Vansina's mature sense: not as a residue of events waiting to be excavated, but as a chain of transmission that is reshaped each time it is spoken, and that must be criticised for genre, performance context, and social function before it is used for chronology.¹⁰ The corpus assembled here is mixed by design. It includes sworn testimony and pleadings from Suit No. HIH/46/2012 and Suit No. HIH/18/2015; conversations with titled men, women ritual specialists, and younger community historians; song texts associated with Mbele, Abiri, and Arigo; observations of Iri Ji and river-cult observance; and the printed local histories against which courtroom speech can be set.

I do not pretend to stand outside the material. I was present in court as a witness, not as a commissioned expert for one side. That position has costs and advantages. It gave me access to a high-stakes register of tradition that a visiting researcher might never hear, because people do not lightly commit an ancestor to an affidavit. It also means that some versions reached me already sharpened for adversarial use. I have therefore tried, throughout, to keep the courtroom and the compound in view of one another. A tradition that appears only under cross-examination is not more true than a tradition sung at a festival. It is differently true.

Two further cautions follow. First, Igbo origin traditions are notoriously plural. Elizabeth Isichei recorded an Mbaïse elder who told a researcher, with a kind of weary firmness, that the Igbo "did not come from anywhere," and that anyone who said otherwise was a liar.¹¹ Adiele Afigbo, who did more than any other historian

to give Igbo studies a critical method, treated such statements not as naivety but as a theory of deep settlement in the Nsukka–Awka–Orlu–Okigwe heartland from as early as the third millennium BCE.¹² Uli's stories sit inside that larger argument. They are local answers to a regional question.

Second, I resist the temptation to rank the three narratives by their apparent “historicity.” Archaeologists have not yet given Uli a site report that could referee the claims of 2,200 years of potter-ancestors or of a migration from the Nsukka–Awka–Orlu corridor. That absence is not a licence for cynicism. It is a reminder that, for the communities who keep these stories, the relevant test has rarely been laboratory dating. The relevant test is whether a story can still organise land, title, marriage, and peace.

Three Principal Narratives

The Njurumuwa Fraternal Narrative

The first tradition presents Uli under an older personal name, Njurumuwa, as one of four brothers, sons of Achara Ogidi. The siblings are Ihembosi, Okija, Ihiala, and Njurumuwa himself. The story is domestic before it is political. Njurumuwa is a gifted wood carver and an unhandsome son. His mother, Nwobi, is skilled in *uri* body painting. She covers him with designs of such authority that ugliness falls away and a praise-name is born: *Ojiri Uri ka*—“he who surpassed others by *uri* painting.” From that act of maternal craft the community-name Uli is said to descend.

The narrative then does what fraternal charters across Igboland so often do: it explains inequality among towns that still recognise one another as kin. Ihembosi is demoted. The *ofo* staff of authority moves to Okija. A southward migration from the Anambra River basin is remembered as the geographical consequence of a family quarrel. Anyone who has listened to Igbo town histories will hear the familiar music. Brothers are a way of talking about neighbouring polities. A mother's art is a way of talking about a distinctive cultural gift. A transferred *ofo* is a way of talking about who may still claim seniority when the yam festival comes or when a boundary is walked.¹³

What is easy to miss, if one reads the story only as a charming etiological tale, is its gendered theory of ethnogenesis. Uli does not become Uli through a conqueror's spear. It becomes Uli through a woman's knowledge of plants, line, and the convertible beauty of the body. That is not incidental. It binds the town's name to a wider Igbo aesthetic that colonial ethnographers photographed, that Nsukka modernists later reclaimed, and that women in many communities have now largely ceased to practise as everyday art.¹⁴ In Njurumuwa's story, identity is something painted into visibility. The first politics is the politics of being made presentable enough to stand among brothers.

The narrative also encodes a moral economy of talent and lack. Njurumuwa's carving skill is not enough. Appearance, which in Igbo social thought is never only skin, must be repaired. Nwobi's intervention suggests that community is an achievement of care as much as of blood. I have heard versions in which the brothers' rivalry is told with laughter, and versions in which the demotion of Ihembosi is told with a tightness around the mouth. Both tones belong to the charter. A family story that cannot still wound is no longer doing political work.

The Autochthonous Priestly Narrative

The second tradition refuses the language of a single founding brother. It insists on deep antiquity—interlocutors sometimes say more than two thousand two hundred years—and on a first population of New Stone Age potters and basket makers. Into that older world come forest immigrants: Ogbu the *dibia* (healer-diviner), Agbuchi the musician, Ezike, Epum, Nnachi. They are not described as conquerors who erase what they find. They are described as people “called” by river and forest deities and endowed with particular crafts: medicine, the music known as Amara, warfare, farming.

Memory here is kept less in genealogy than in performance. Mbele, Abiri, and Arigo songs, together with river-spirit cults, are the archives. To ask an elder for a king-list is, in this register, to ask the wrong question. One should ask who still knows the song that names a pool, or which kindred still feeds a particular shrine at the beginning of the farming year. The narrative's claim is not that Uli has always had the same offices, but that Uli has always had a conversation with the non-human persons of its landscape.¹⁵

Read against Afigbo's heartland model, the autochthonous account is a local intensification of a regional thesis. Afigbo argued that the Nsukka, Awka, Okigwe, Orlu, and Owerri axes formed a cultural baseline whose settlement reached back into the third millennium BCE, and from which later waves moved outward.¹⁶ Uli's priestly narrative does not need Afigbo in order to exist. But it becomes more intelligible once one sees that many Igbo communities distinguish, without embarrassment, between those who “were always here” and those who arrived with a skill the land required. Integration, not replacement, is the preferred plot.

There is a quiet politics in that plot. By making first peoples potters and basket makers—workers of earth and fibre—and by making later arrivals specialists in medicine, music, and war, the narrative distributes honour across occupations that a purely dynastic story would rank. It also protects the claims of shrine-keepers and earth-

priests against any later attempt to treat kingship as the only ancient thing in town. If the rivers called the people, then the rivers remain a court of appeal. That is why this version is most at home in festival, sacrifice, and song, and why it can sound almost evasive when a lawyer asks for the name of the first king.

The Ogbu Migration and Covenant Narrative

The third tradition is the one I heard, almost without variation of plot, under oath. Ogbu, multi-talented son of Ezekanunu, moves out of the old Nsukka–Awka–Orlu corridor—the same belt Afigbo treated as Igbo heartland—and comes into the country that will be Uli.¹⁷ He does not found a people by solitary settlement. He forges covenants that gather nine groups into the entity remembered as *Ebem Teghete Uli*, the nine folds of Uli. Those groups are named, in the recitation that circulated in both suits, as Ogbu, Amaja, Ubahudara, Ezike, Umuorji na Elegwo, Umuepum, Umubazu, Amamputu, and Nnachi.¹⁸ Two pacts organise the political centre. The Ogbu–Nnachi covenant establishes kingship. The Ogbu–Egwe pact makes Egwelogbu the kingmakers and *Ezeala*, owners of the soil.

The same tradition also explains the town's name through war, not through a mother's paintbrush. *Uri* was used to darken Ogbu's warriors before they went out, and to mark the opponents they killed. The dye became a tactic: concealment of one's own body and the staining of the fallen. From that practice came the praise and the toponym *Uli egbu ataji*—Uli that kills and dyes his victims. In this register the name of the town is not first a story of beauty. It is a story of a warband that made indigo do the work of terror and recognition.¹⁹

The language of the settlement is contractual in a precise sense. A covenant (*igba ndu*, the binding of life) in Igbo political thought is not a metaphor borrowed from European constitutionalism. It is a ritual technology for making strangers into partners and for placing a curse on whoever later treats the partnership as optional.²⁰ Ogbu's story is therefore a theory of how a segmented community can acquire a centre without pretending that the centre was always there. Kingship is invented as a settlement among groups, not as a gift descending from a single ancestor to a single line. Kingmakers are not ornaments. They are parties to a pact, and the soil has owners who are not identical with the wearer of the red cap.

This is why the narrative travels so well into court. Modern chieftaincy law in southeastern Nigeria is itself a palimpsest: precolonial title systems, colonial warrant chieftaincy, military-era traditional-ruler edicts, and civilian recognition statutes stacked on one another.²¹ A story that already speaks of nine named folds, kingmakers, owners of the soil, and a founding contract can be translated, with only a little violence, into the idioms of ruling house, kingmaking committee, and customary right. The Njurumuwa story, with its painted son and transferred *ofo*, does not translate as cleanly. The priestly story, with its river-called potters, translates hardly at all. The Ogbu narrative is not more ancient because lawyers love it. It is more usable in an arena that demands offices, sequences, and named counterparties.

I want to be careful here. Usability is not the same as fabrication. Nothing I heard in court suggested that Ogbu had been invented for the litigation. The opposite seemed true. Parties who agreed on little else agreed that this was the story one told when the town's internal constitution was at stake. What the court revealed was not a fake past. It revealed the register in which a particular past becomes public law.

Theoretical Framework

Four approaches, used as complementary tools rather than as a single church, organise the reading.

Segmentary lineage theory, classically associated with Fortes and Evans-Pritchard and long applied—sometimes too hastily—to Igbo society, helps explain why brother-stories proliferate.²² In a segmentary idiom, groups that oppose one another at one level recall a common ancestor at the next. The Njurumuwa narrative is almost a textbook instance: four towns as four sons; rivalry as the engine of differentiation; shared paternity as the residual claim to peace. Afigbo warned, however, that Igbo political systems were more diverse than the acephalous stereotype allowed, and that oral tradition in segmentary societies must be criticised with that diversity in mind.²³ Uli, which remembers both fraternal equality and contracted kingship, confirms the warning.

Aidan Southall's concept of the segmentary state is useful for the Ogbu material. Southall defined such a state as one in which ritual suzerainty and political sovereignty do not coincide: the former reaches toward a flexible periphery, the latter remains concentrated at a core.²⁴ *Ebem Teghete Uli* looks less like a miniature European kingdom than like a pact-structure in which kingship, kingmaking, and earth-priesthood are deliberately non-identical. To call Uli "stateless" because it does not resemble Benin is to miss the sophistication of its own constitutional imagination.

Anthony D. Smith's ethno-symbolism directs attention to the long life of myths, memories, and symbols that modern institutions inherit rather than invent from nothing.²⁵ The praise-name *Ojiri Uri ka*, the war-name *Uli egbu ataji*, the nine named folds, the songs of river cults, and the figure of Ogbu the covenant-maker are not decorations added after the fact to a sociological skeleton. They are the skeleton's remembered flesh. A

community reproduces itself by keeping such symbols available for new situations—including, now, the High Court and the university seminar.

Finally, Malinowski's charter-myth thesis, read with Vansina rather than against him, allows a claim that still needs repeating in some African studies debates. A story may be historically "unprovable" in a positivist sense and still be a primary source for the institutions it warrants.²⁶ The point is not that myth is a substitute for history. The point is that, in Uli, myth is one of the forms history takes when people need to say why an arrangement deserves to continue. Indigenous epistemology is not waiting to be translated into theory. It is already theoretical.

Analysis: Complementary Charters and Contextual Authority

Once the three narratives are placed side by side, the appearance of contradiction begins to fade. They are specialised instruments.

The Njurumuwa story answers questions of relatedness and honour among neighbouring towns. It tells Uli people how they stand with Ihiala, Okija, and Ihembosi; why a staff moved; why a mother's art became a name. Its natural homes are family argument, festival oratory, and the kind of local history that wants to place the town inside a brotherhood of settlements. It humanises ethnogenesis. It says: we became ourselves because someone loved an unhandsome son enough to remake his face.

The autochthonous priestly story answers questions of belonging that no genealogy can exhaust. It tells Uli people why the rivers matter, why certain songs are not entertainment, why potters and *dibia* and musicians are all first people in different keys. Its natural homes are shrine, forest edge, and the mouths of those who still keep the older cults. It sacralises ethnogenesis. It says: we were called, and the land has not finished calling.

The Ogbu story answers questions of office and of force. It tells Uli people who the nine folds are, who may make a king, who owns the soil, how *uri* became a war tactic, and what curse sits on the breach of those arrangements. Its natural homes are title-taking, dispute, and—under modern conditions—the affidavit. It constitutionalises ethnogenesis. It says: we are a pact, and a pact can be recited before a judge.

Even the name of the town is partitioned by charter. Njurumuwa gives Uli through a mother's beautifying hand. Ogbu gives Uli through warriors darkened for the raid and victims stained after it. The two etymologies are not a problem to be solved. They are evidence that *uri* itself is a polyvalent technology in Igbo memory: cosmetic in one room, martial in another, sacral in a third. A historian who insists on a single derivation has already chosen which social need the name is allowed to serve.

The courtrooms of Suit No. HIH/46/2012 and Suit No. HIH/18/2015 did not invent this division of labour. They exposed it. Parties reached for Ogbu because the suits were about chieftaincy, not about whether Uli was prettier than its brothers or older than its rivers. Printed town histories, written to nourish pride rather than to allocate a stool, could afford to linger on Njurumuwa's painted body and on the antiquity of potters. Each arena selected the charter that could do the work the arena required. That selection is itself an Igbo historical method. It is how a segmentary society keeps more than one past available without collapsing into incoherence.²⁷

A comparison with other Igbo origin corpora is instructive. Nri traditions charter priestly hegemony and the moral foundations of agriculture; Aro traditions charter oracle, trade, and military reach; Onitsha and related Niger traditions charter kingship through migration from the west.²⁸ Uli's distinction is not that it has several stories—almost every Igbo town does—but that the several stories have remained so clearly partitioned by function. One can still hear, in ordinary speech, which narrative is being asked to stand up. That clarity is a gift to the historian. It is also a warning. To flatten the three into a single "authentic" version would be to repeat the court's demand in the name of scholarship.

There is a further implication for the old debate about Igbo statelessness. If Uli can remember contracted kingship, earth-ownership, and fraternal equality as simultaneous truths, then the binary of "state" and "stateless society" was always too coarse for this landscape.²⁹ What Uli remembers is closer to a constitutional pluralism: different sources of authority, differently storied, activated by different crises. Colonial warrant chieftaincy and postcolonial traditional-ruler law did not write on a blank page. They entered a world that already knew how to argue about origins when power was at stake.

I am not arguing that all three narratives are equally serviceable for every historical question. If one is reconstructing settlement sequence, the Ogbu corridor-migration and the autochthonous potter stratum suggest different, possibly layered, movements that future archaeology and historical linguistics might test. If one is reconstructing gender and aesthetic history, Njurumuwa and Nwobi are indispensable. If one is reconstructing ritual geography, the river cults are the first map. If one is reconstructing the martial uses of *uri*, the *Uli egbu ataji* charter is the place to begin. The historian's task is not to choose a winner. It is to know which charter is being offered, to whom, and at what cost.

Conclusion

I began in a courtroom because that is where the problem first refused to stay polite. A community that can place rival litigants inside one covenant story, and then publish other stories in its commemorative books, is not confused about its past. It is practised in the art of keeping several pasts ready.

The three narratives of Uli—Njurumuwa the painted brother, the river-called potters and their immigrant specialists, Ogbu the covenant-maker of *Ebem Teghete*—are complementary social charters. Together they narrate kinship, spiritual rootedness, and political contract. The Ogbu tradition remains the most authoritative in matters of internal governance and litigation because it alone translates, with relatively little remainder, into the language of institutions that modern courts are prepared to recognise. That fact tells us as much about the colonial and postcolonial state as it does about Uli.

For Igbo historiography more broadly, the case recommends a shift of posture. Decolonial work is not accomplished by declaring oral sources valid and then proceeding as if they were poorly edited documents. It is accomplished by taking seriously the indigenous distinction among kinds of story, kinds of occasion, and kinds of truth. Vansina gave African history a method for criticising tradition. Malinowski, read without condescension, gave it a language for the work tradition does. Afigbo insisted that Igbo people had been in their homelands long enough to develop many political forms. Uli's competing narratives, once they are allowed to remain plural, confirm all three lessons at once.

What I hope this article leaves in the reader's ear is not a reconstructed "first Uli" but a way of listening. When a people tell you three beginnings, they are not failing a test. They are telling you that identity, land, and power have never been a single question.

Endnotes

1. Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965); recast as Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985). For the professional reception, see David Newbury, "Contradictions at the Heart of the Canon: Jan Vansina and the Debate over Oral Historiography in Africa, 1960–1985," *History in Africa* 34 (2007): 139–91.
2. Bronisław Malinowski, "Myth in Primitive Psychology" (1926), reprinted in *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1948), 93–148. Malinowski's formulation is that myth "is not an idle tale, but a hard-worked active force," a "pragmatic charter of primitive faith and moral wisdom" (101).
3. On Igbo political variety beyond the acephalous stereotype, see A. E. Afigbo, *Ropes of Sand: Studies in Igbo History and Culture* (Ibadan: University Press / Oxford University Press, 1981); Victor C. Uchendu, *The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965); Ikenna Nzimiro, *Studies in Ibo Political Systems: Chieftaincy and Politics in Four Niger States* (London: Frank Cass, 1972).
4. On *ulil/uri* as body and mural art, see Elizabeth Willis, "A Lexicon of Igbo Uli Motifs," *Nsukka Journal of the Humanities* 1 (1987); Simon Ottenberg, *New Traditions from Nigeria: Seven Artists of the Nsukka Group* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997); Paul Basu, "Uli: The Colonial Archive as Decolonial Cultural Resource," *African Arts* 57, no. 3 (2024): 8–27. Related motifs appear in Thurstan Shaw, *Igbo-Ukwu: An Account of Archaeological Discoveries in Eastern Nigeria* (London: Faber and Faber, 1970). The martial use of the same dye is treated below in the Ogbu narrative.
5. Geographical descriptions consistent with local usage appear in G. C. Okonkwo, *URI: History, Life, Culture and Custom of a People* (n.p.: community publication; copy held by the National Library of Nigeria); and C. G. Dike et al., "Influence of Traditional Taboo Practices on Natural Resource Conservation in Uli, Ihiala Local Government Area of Anambra State Nigeria," *International Journal of Engineering and Sciences* (2015).
6. Quarter and village lists vary by informant and by the political purpose of the list. The fourfold scheme of Eziam, Ihite, Umuaku, and Umuoma is the one most consistently offered in civic contexts. The nine folds of *Ebem Teghete Uli* named in the Ogbu charter should not be confused with this later quarter-map; they belong to a different register of enumeration.
7. Dike et al., "Influence of Traditional Taboo Practices." The Atamiri forest and river appear in that study as sites where ancestral prohibition still structures access to resources.
8. On the Uli (Annabelle) airstrip and the Biafran airlift, see Michael I. Draper, *Shadows: Airlift and Airwar in Biafra and Nigeria, 1967–1970* (Aldershot: Hikoki, 1999); John de St. Jorre, *The Nigerian Civil War* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1972).
9. Okonkwo, *URI: History, Life, Culture and Custom of a People*. This work is treated here as a primary source of the commemorative register rather than as a secondary authority to be mined for facts in isolation from its civic purpose.

10. Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*, chs. 1–3. See also Jan Vansina, “Oral Tradition and Its Methodology,” in *UNESCO General History of Africa*, vol. 1, *Methodology and African Prehistory*, ed. J. Ki-Zerbo (Paris: UNESCO; London: Heinemann, 1981), 142–65.
11. Elizabeth Isichei, *A History of African Societies to 1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 246, citing an Mbaise elder interviewed in 1972. See also Elizabeth Isichei, *A History of the Igbo People* (London: Macmillan, 1976); Elizabeth Isichei, *Igbo Worlds: An Anthology of Oral Histories and Historical Descriptions* (London: Macmillan, 1977).
12. A. E. Afigbo, *An Outline of Igbo History* (Owerri: RADA Publishing, 1986); A. E. Afigbo, “Traditions of Igbo Origins: A Comment,” *Nigeria Magazine* 144 (1983): 3–12; Afigbo, *Ropes of Sand*, chs. 1–3. For appraisal, see Gloria Chuku, “Adiele Afigbo and the Development of Igbo and Nigerian Historical Studies,” in *The Igbo Intellectual Tradition*, ed. Gloria Chuku (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 165–92; Toyin Falola, ed., *Igbo History and Society: The Essays of Adiele Afigbo* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2005).
13. Comparative fraternal charters are abundant in Igbo town histories. See John N. Oriji, *Traditions of Igbo Origin: A Study of Pre-Colonial Population Movements in Africa* (New York: Peter Lang, 1990); Afigbo, “Traditions of Igbo Origins.” On the *ofo* as staff of authority, see C. N. Ubah, “The Supreme God, Divinities and Ancestors in Igbo Traditional Religion,” *Africa* 52, no. 2 (1982): 90–105.
14. Basu, “Uli”; Ottenberg, *New Traditions from Nigeria*. The gendered labour of body-painting is essential to any reading of the Njuruwuwa charter and stands in productive tension with the martial use of the same dye in the Ogbu charter.
15. On land, water, and deity in Igbo religion, see Francis A. Arinze, *Sacrifice in Ibo Religion* (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1970); Emefie Ikenga-Metuh, *God and Man in African Religion* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1981); Isichei, *Igbo Worlds*. On song as archive, see Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*, 14–27.
16. Afigbo, *An Outline of Igbo History*; Afigbo, *Ropes of Sand*. The “cultural federation” image is developed in essays collected in Falola, *Igbo History and Society*.
17. The corridor identified by informants corresponds to Afigbo’s heartland rather than to a single documented town of departure. Ezekanunu is not forced here onto a published Nsukka or Awka king-list; the historically usable claim is directional and cultural.
18. The nine groups of *Ebem Teghete Uli* as recited in Suit No. HIH/46/2012 and Suit No. HIH/18/2015, High Court of the Onitsha Judicial Division, and confirmed in field recitation, are Ogbu, Amaja, Ubahudara, Ezike, Umuorji na Elegwo, Umuepum, Umubazu, Amamputu, and Nnachi. Orthography varies slightly by speaker (Amaja/Amaka; Umuepum/Epum). The form used here follows the courtroom and elder recitation supplied for this study.
19. Field and court recitation of the Ogbu charter. *Uli egbu ataji* is rendered here as “Uli that kills and dyes his victims,” preserving the double work of *uri* as both lethal mark and staining agent. The motif should be read alongside, not instead of, the Njuruwuwa etymology; each charter assigns the dye to a different social labour. On *uli* pigment more generally, see Willis, “A Lexicon of Igbo Uli Motifs”; Basu, “Uli.”
20. On *igba ndu* and related covenant practice, see A. E. Afigbo, “The Warrant Chief System in Eastern Nigeria: Direct or Indirect Rule?,” *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 3, no. 4 (1967): 683–700; G. T. Basden, *Among the Ibos of Nigeria* (London: Seeley, Service, 1921), to be used critically as a colonial ethnography rather than as a last word on oath.
21. A. E. Afigbo, *The Warrant Chiefs: Indirect Rule in Southeastern Nigeria, 1891–1929* (London: Longman, 1972); Axel Harneit-Sievers, “Igbo Traditional Rulers: Chieftaincy and the State in Southeastern Nigeria,” *Afrika Spectrum* 33, no. 1 (1998): 57–79.
22. Meyer Fortes and E. E. Evans-Pritchard, eds., *African Political Systems* (London: Oxford University Press for the International African Institute, 1940); E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940).
23. A. E. Afigbo, “Oral Tradition and the History of Segmentary Societies,” *History in Africa* 12 (1985): 1–10.
24. Aidan Southall, *Alur Society: A Study in Processes and Types of Domination* (Cambridge: Heffer, 1956); Aidan Southall, “The Segmentary State in Africa and Asia,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 30, no. 1 (1988): 52–82.
25. Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986); Anthony D. Smith, *Ethno-symbolism and Nationalism: A Cultural Approach* (London: Routledge, 2009); Anthony D. Smith, “Culture, Community and Territory: The Politics of Ethnicity and Nationalism,” *International Affairs* 72, no. 3 (1996): 445–58.

26. Malinowski, "Myth in Primitive Psychology"; Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*. Functionalist charter analysis without source criticism becomes circular; source criticism without attention to charter function misses why a tradition survives.
27. On the contextual activation of tradition, see J. D. Y. Peel, "The Cultural Work of Yoruba Ethnogenesis," in *History and Ethnicity*, ed. Elizabeth Tonkin, Maryon McDonald, and Malcolm Chapman (London: Routledge, 1989), 198–215.
28. On Nri, see M. Angulu Onwuejeogwu, *An Igbo Civilization: Nri Kingdom and Hegemony* (London: Ethnographica, 1981); Afigbo, *Ropes of Sand*, 31–68. On Aro, see K. Onwuka Dike and Felicia Ekejiuba, *The Aro of South-eastern Nigeria, 1650–1980* (Ibadan: University Press, 1990). On Onitsha and related kingships, see Nzimiro, *Studies in Ibo Political Systems*; Richard N. Henderson, *The King in Every Man: Evolutionary Trends in Onitsha Ibo Society and Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972).
29. Afigbo, *Ropes of Sand*; Nzimiro, *Studies in Ibo Political Systems*. Precolonial kingship and acephalous organisation coexisted as regional variants rather than as evolutionary stages.