



The Ibo, also spelled Igbo, are the third most populous ethnic group in Nigeria, after the Hausa and the Yoruba. The Ibo, who make up about 16% of Nigeria's people, live mainly in the southeastern part of the country. They can be divided into five major cultural groups, speaking a variety of dialects of the Ibo language. Most of Iboland is tropical rain forest, with a rainy season from April to October and a dry season dominated by the dusty harmattan wind.

Most rural Ibo are subsistence farmers-- that is, they raise crops for their own consumption. Yam, cassava, and taro are the staple crops, with corn, pumpkin, okra, melon, and beans also important. Traditionally, men grow yams and women grow the other food crops. Palm trees are grown for oil and fiber; trading, crafts, and manual labor are other important sources of income.

Traditionally, the Ibo lived in villages based on lineage: the male heads of the household were all related through their fathers' sides. At marriage, a wife went to live with her husband. A prosperous man would have two or three wives, each living in her own hut within the family compound. Villages were loosely organized into groups, or clans, of about 5,000 people. Villages in the same clan shared a market and a meeting place, as well as ancestral spirits and ceremonies based on the clan's descent from a common founder. The Ibo had no single leader; there were no kings or capital cities, as there were, for instance, among the nearby Yoruba people. Decisions were made by discussion and consensus during meetings of all adult males in a clan. Some men had special influence by virtue of wealth, personality, age, or kinship status, or through

having earned, rather than inherited titles of nobility. High value was placed on individual achievement and on stating one's views eloquently. For the free adult males, or *diala*, of the community, Ibo society was democratic. Women, however, were excluded from the community decision-making process. In addition, some Ibo owned slaves, or *ohu*, who had been captured in war or pawned as payment for debt.

There was also a class of religious outcasts, *osu*, who were not permitted to mingle with the freeborn. The *osu* functioned as priests in the service to the gods, yet tradition required the Ibo to treat the *osu* with contempt rather than respect.

Before the late nineteenth century, when Anglican missionaries from Britain began a vigorous campaign of conversion, the Ibo drew solidarity from their belief in a supreme god, Chukwu. Chukwu had created a multitude of lesser gods as well as the visible world. Natural forces, such as Earth and Sky, were represented by important gods or goddesses. The will of the deities was revealed through oracles or divination ceremonies. Additionally, each clan, each village, each household, each individual, had a protective ancestral spirit. The personal guardian spirit for an individual was called a *chi*. A person's *chi* affected his or her destiny flexibly, for the individual could influence *chi* through his or her actions and through rituals.

Because of the Ibo's proximity to West Africa's ports of trade, many Ibos were taken as slaves by Europeans and African slave traders; the fact that the Ibo were not united under one strong ruler made them easy prey for slaverunners. But the other side of this coin-- the importance the Ibo placed on equality and individual achievement has helped them gain prominence among the leaders of modern Nigeria.

