

# Spatial Distribution of Iwhuruoha (Ikwerre) People in Rivers State, Nigeria

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## Abstract

The work explores the intricate spatial spread of Iwhuruoha (Ikwerre) ethnic nationality in Rivers State, the distribution of Ikwerre population virtually cut across four major local government areas in the state and beyond; and over the past periods, significant parts of the indigenous people have experienced balkanization and migration resulting to intricate spatial spreading of the Iwhuruoha (Ikwerre) ethnic nationality. The work argues that thou, the indigenous people of Iwhuruoha Ikwerre people may have experienced a pull dispersal in their spread yet they maintains continuity in cultural symbolism, language identity and coherent traditional life style, all this to say the list makes them unique set of ethnic existence among other ethnic nationality in Nigeria, yet the work identified and observe that the significant majority of this people inhabits substantial part of the northern part of Rivers State which roughly spread and lies within coordinate  $4^{\circ} 50'N$   $5^{\circ} 15'N$   $6^{\circ} 30'E$  and  $7^{\circ} 15'E$  covering a land area of about  $21,400 \text{ km}^2$  which is about 20 percent of the total cultivable land in Rivers State (Wahua 1992). Virtually all the areas covered by this ethnic group are moderately accessible with speedy growth and development and as such attaining and attracting multi-emigrant population that seem to envelop its area of inhabitation.

**Keywords:** spatial distribution, Iwhuruoha (ikwerre), Rivers state, Nigeria.

## Introduction

One of the key uncertainties surrounding most people of Rivers State origin and beyond is the understanding of the spatial distribution of Iwhuruoha (Ikwerre) people in Rivers State, and as such this may have brought series of effect to such mind set wanting to know and ask question about Ikwerre ethnic nationality because such people do not even know who are the Ikwerre people and how they are distributed. Incidentally, this question reminds one of a similar question posed some thirty five years ago by Okoi Arikpo at the Lugard Memorial Lectures of 1957; in that memorial lecture, Arikpo (1957) examined the geographical, ecological, ethnic, cultural, political, socio-economic, linguistic and religious features among others, which form the basis of the Nigerian polity in the first place. It is however, very important to note that starting from the basic assumption that "the peoples of Nigeria are basically of the same racial stock yet there are evidence in support of the view that "the indigenous negro population of Nigeria have been modified in such a way that a large number of physical types has been produced, this is due to the result of waves of migration and the blending of Negro populations Hamitic and semitic peoples who entered or relocated in different parts of Nigeria several centuries ago. Evidence from various historical tracing shows that from geological, archaeological and ethno-linguistic evidence suggests that different part of Nigeria had been continuously inhabited even from prehistorical times. While the emergence of the various extant ethnic groups in the country is the result of a long process of cultural differentiation among various racial and cultural groups in the country is the result of a long process of cultural differentiation among various racial and cultural groups. Arikpo (1957), maintain that negro culture forms the basis of the whole of Nigeria, through the elements of that culture are more deeply entrenched south of the line of latitude 9 north.

Bearing the main features of the above discussion in mind and extrapolating the main insights as they relate to the question "who are the Iwhuruoha (Ikwerre) people and how are they distributed in Rivers State?" This no doubt a question that will ushers to the clarity bugging our mind and as such our search for an answer may take us along a number of lines of inquiry.

This is because the questions may generate a number of subsidiary questions and hypotheses which need to be explore or tested. For instance, are the Iwhuruoha (Ikwerre) people migrated into their present location from one or several original homes? Are they a homogeneous or a heterogeneous ethnic group that probably make up of the over fourth hundred ethnic groups in Nigeria polity.

In order to establish the prima facie unity as a cogent fact an extensive and indepth research has to be conducted into the existential, historical, cultural, linguistic, geographical, economic and other features of the life of Iwhuruoha people in Rivers State.

## 1.2 Who are the Iwhuruoha people?

To trace who the Iwhuruoha people are, may not be that easy, because the primary documentary (i.e. archival) evidence on Iwhuruoha (Ikwerre) people is scanty, however, recent attempts have being made to trace and

collate historical and cultural evidence and to compel records as there might be in various archives both in Nigeria and abroad. Most of this record had erroneous assumption about the origin and the people of Iwhuruoha, this is one main reason Otonti (1993) assert that the paucity of both primary and secondary evidence on Ikwerre history is largely traceable to the bland assumption on the part of earlier investigators and authors of intelligence report that Ikwerre or Iwhuruoha people are merely a branch of the Ibo ethnic groups with a cultural zone extending right from the northernmost reaches of Nsukka area or division to the bright of Briafra on the Atlantic seaboard; it is on record that even up to the time of Willink Commission of inquiries which was conducted in the late fifties discovered that some knowledgeable and articulate Ikwerre citizens were content with the situation. However, with the reawakening of Iwhuruoha (Ikwerre) people since the end of the Nigeria civil war with the pressure of ethno linguistic evidence in the last four decades have raised the question of the existential status of Iwhuruoha (Ikwerre) to a new level of relevance and one requiring urge and judicious determination to evaluate the existential picture as it can be approached from different number of complementary angles to picture the reality of who Iwhuruoha people are and this can be gathered using the following complementary angles:

**i. Geographical angle:** Geographically speaking, the Iwhuruoha people are a group of people, an ethnic group of people inhabiting a substantial part of the northern half of Rivers State, lies roughly within the coordinates  $4^{\circ} 50'N$   $5^{\circ} 15'N$   $6^{\circ}30' E$  and  $7^{\circ} 15'E$ , covering a land area of about 21,400km<sup>2</sup> which is about 20 percent of the total cultivable land in Rivers State (Wahua, 1992). The area is made up of four (4) LGA's Obio/Akpor, Port Harcourt, Emohua and Ikwerre local government areas and virtually all the LGAs of Iwhuruoha (Ikwerre) people are moderately accessible through the state and federal government roads, these includes and not limited to Aba-Port Harcourt express road, Warri-Port Harcourt express road (i.e. East-West Road and Port Harcourt-Owerri Road) in addition to various state roads in the area and as such their territory is bounded by those of other ethnic groups; to the northern and west by those of the Ogba-Egbema, Ekpeye and Abua to the south by the Ijaw, to the south west, and east by those of the Tai/Elemo and Etche ethnic groups and to the northeast by the Ibo of Imo State and Abia state respectively. The 1963 census population of Iwhuruoha (Ikwerre) people stand at Two Hundred Thousand people (200,000) and over the year, the population of the indigenous Iwhuruoha (Ikwerre) people tremendously increased and as such the population stand at over 2.5million by the 2006 census) count and since then the population is on a constant rise and as such give them a sense of belonging in the scheme of things among various ethnic groups in the nation as they constitute the majority in Rivers State, even though there are other ethnic populations in the neighbouring states the Iwhuruoha (Ikwerre) people speaks the Ikwerre dialects.

## 2. A distinct and different set of people

Available record on Iwhuruoha people shows that despite they constitute minor ethnic group when compared to other larger ethnic groups in Nigeria when it comes to the vicissitudes of political fortune; they regard themselves as a group distinct and different from other immediate neighbours, this is because they refer themselves as Iwhuruoha people while variously referred their neighbours as (Nde) Ekpeye, Abua, Rukwo (i.e. the Ijaws), Ogoni (i.e. Elemo and Ogoni people), Etche, etc; including Isoma or Mgbom people (Ibo) and none of these group mentioned herein has attempted to assimilate the Ikwerre to themselves as Iwhuruoha which is very distinct to their identification as a group of ethnic nationality. They harbor lots of economic, political and administrative structure of both the state and federal government; a total of 92 oil wells, producing an estimated 100,000 barrels of crude oil daily, various kind of agricultural scheme and administrative head as well as higher institutional structures are all located in Ikwerre land, the University of Port Harcourt, the Rivers State University, as well as the Obi Wali Polytechnic are all sited in the area. The question of the existential status of Iwhuruoha (Ikwerre) ethnolinguistic evidence throw some light on the vexed question of Ikwerre identity resulting from their linguistic consideration. Arikpo had in one of the publication referred to linguistic consideration of an ethnic group as perhaps the most important of the element of culture by means of which the different groups of Nigerians may be classified. We try to stress on the linguistic identity because of the notion held by most theory about the origin and the people of Iwhuruoha people, this is because the putative affinity (identity) of the Ibo and Iwhuruoha people had been one of the main reasons and or grounds for the assimilation of the Iwhuruoha to the Ibos. However, for a catche reference, it is important to note here that paradoxically, the first doubts about the assimilation were indirectly raised in 1913 by the then Right Rev. Herbert Tugwell of Anglican Bishop of the Niger, be that as it may, it is also in record that in the second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the union Ibo Bible Nso was then being introduced for use in Iboland. During this period, Bishop Tugwell undertook an experimentation tour of Iwhuruoha (Ikwerre) people in their various towns and villages with the intention of identifying and classifying if any difference in linguistic structure on the assumed to be Ibo-speaking Iwhuruoha ethnic group, on a sweep reaction, as reported by Tasia, "Tugwell discovered from

the tests he carried out that although the Iwhuruoha (Ikwerre) people were often regarded as Ibo in the union Ibo Bible translation; surprisingly, the Iwhuruoha people find it difficult to understand the Bible Nso, and as such raises the doubt about the existential status of Iwhuruoha originating from the Ibo-ethnic group as most theories asserted in their position.

Another fact which has previously cantered the prematurely conclusion about the origin and existential tracing of the Iwhuruoha (Ikwerre) people was the works and position of Kay Williamson in his linguistic studies after over half a century off virtually uninterrupted spread of Ibo influence, culture and hegemony among neighbouring ethnic groups which was however aided and abetted by the various forces of Western imperialism. Key Williamson in a technical but realistic position raised the question of the linguistic relationship between the Igbo and the languages of the Northern part of Rivers State, for example Ikwerre, Etche, Ogba, Ekpeye and so on. She contained this on the basis of a lexicostatistical study of the areas concerned and was able to arrived at the conclusion that instead of regarding Iwhuruoha (Ikwerre) people and or ethnic group and the other languages as dialects of Igbo, it is best to regard them as related languages in what she terms “the lower Niger group of languages” (excluding the southern part of the Niger Delta).

### 1.3 Origin of Ikwerre

The Ikwerre are considered by a majority of scholars as a sub group of the Igbo people of south eastern Nigeria. There are several theories over the origin and the strongest and most widely accepted one is the theory linking the Ikwerre to an Igbo origin. This theory suggests that, Ikwerre are descendents from an Igbo migration from Awka and Orlu areas towards south; while Igbo scholars take Ikwerre as part of the southern Igbo, while Amadi, an Ikwerre scholar, says that the Igbo origin theory has some support even inside Ikwerre themselves, that Ikwerre would be descendents of a migration of Arochukwu Igbo, with Okpo Nwagidi being the leader of the IKwerre tribe. These theories maintained that before the civil war, there had been dissident voices that claimed that Ikwerre could have migrated from Owerri, Ohaji, Ngwa and Etche areas of Igboland. But when Port Harcourt was conquered by Nigeria during the Biafra-Nigeria war and the Igbo people from other parts of Igboland fled the territory, a UN report says that the Ikwerre people decided to claim that the Ikwerre were non-igbo for convenience and in order to protect themselves from annihilation by the Nigerian soldiers and to also save their properties from being destroyed. However, the Ikwerre were officially recognized as a separate group in the 1979 Nigerian constitution.

The Ikwerre are also said to be related or share common ancestry with the Ogba and Ekpeye people (Akalaka brothers) which has also faced series of criticisms from various authors and classical disposition.

### 1.4 Spatial distribution of Iwhuruoha ethnic groups

The geographical spread of Iwhuruoha (Ikwerre) people covers parts of Ohaji communities which is presently found in Imo State these communities includes Assa, Awara, Ihie, Hile, Obitti, Ovrugwo, Umagwor, Umapu and Umuosor clans and kindreds. Apart from these ones, Iwhuruoha apart from these ones, Iwhuruoha (Ikwerre) people are spatially spread and distributed in four different local government areas of Rivers State. In the Ishimbam Elele district of Iwhuruoha people which could today be called Ikwerre Local Government Area has among its inhabitants/clan as Elele clan, Omerelu Clan, Egbeda clan, Umudioga clan, Elele Alimini clan, Apani clan, Ubimini Town, Akpabo Town and Itu Town, etc.

The population status of Ikwerre LGA as at 2006 census count stand at 188,930 and as such it has an area covering 655km<sup>2</sup> and has a density of 405.2/km<sup>2</sup> and was projected to be 256,400 in 2016 (2006, NPC).

Obio/Akpor Local Government Area made up of the Ikwerre Iwhuruoha people is one of the major centers of economic activities in Nigeria, and today is one of the major cities of the Niger Delta. The Local government area covers 260km<sup>2</sup> with at least 464,789 population as indicated by the 2006 National Population Census Commission of Nigeria; Obio/Akpor is bounded by Port Harcourt local government area to the south, Oyigbo to the east, Ikwerre to the north and Emohua to the West. It is located between latitudes 4<sup>0</sup>45N and 4<sup>0</sup>60N and longitudes 6<sup>0</sup>50E and 8<sup>0</sup>00E; the local government area inhabit the following localities, towns and suburbs; Alakahia, Atali, Awalama, Choba, Egbelu, Elelenwo, Eligban, Elingbu, Eliparanwo, Eliozi, Eneka, Iriebe, Mgbuesilaru, Mgbuoba, Mpakurlise, Nkpa, Nkpelu, Ogbogoro, Oginigba, Oro-Igwe, Oroazi, Ozuoba, Rukpokwu, Rumuadaolu, Rumuaghaolu, Rumuchiorlu, Rumudara, Rumudura, Rumekini, Rumekwe, Rumueme, Rumuepirikom, Rumuesara, Rumuewhara, Rumuibekwe, Rumuigbo, Rumukalagbor, Rumunduru, Rumuobiakani, Rumuogba, Rumukalagbor, Rumunduru, Rumuobiakani, Rumuogba, Rumuokparali,

Rumukwurusi, Rumuolumeni, Rumuodomaya, Rumuwoji, Rumuokoro, Rumuokwuta, Rumuokwu, Rumuokwachi, Rumuokwurusi, Rumuola, Rumuolukwu, Rumuomasi, Rumuomo, Rumuosi, Rumuoto, Rumuorlu, Rumuiwaji, Rumuwegwe, Trans Amadi, Woji; all makes up the Obio-Akpor group of clans and kindreds and as such harbor the communities mentioned above.

Port Harcourt local government is another area inhabited by the Iwhuruoha (Ikwerre) people, it is the largest city in Rivers State, with a total area of 109km<sup>2</sup> with a total population of 638.360 (census 2011) about 42sqm) and has a density of 5.856.5/km<sup>2</sup> which is (15.168/sqm), situated 52 kilometers (32mi) southeast of Ahoada and about 40 kilometers (25mi) northwest of Bori. It is bounded to the South by Okirika, to the east by Eleme, to the north by Obio/Akpor and to the West by Degema. The owners and major inhabitants of the area are the Iwhuruoha (Ikwerre) people, although other ethnic groups like Abuloma, Amadi Ama, Borokiri, Tere-Ama and Okuru-Ama are also some inhabitants of the Port Harcourt LGAs including Eagle island otherwise the major communities of Iwhuruoha (Ikwerre) people in Port Harcourt LGA are the: Elekahia, Nkpogu, Nkpolu Oroworukwo, Ogbunu Abali, Oroada, Orochiri, Orogbum, Orolozu, Oromeruezingbu, Oroworukwo, Oromineke, Rumukalagbor, Rumuobiekwe, Rumuwoji, these major Iwhuruoha communities speak Ikwerre dialect in the area.

Another area or local government area where Iwhuruoha (Ikwerre) people are conspicuously found and inhabit their livelihood is Emohua local government area, the area harbours the following towns, communities and villages: Mgbuohia, Mgbuokporo, Mgbuomohia, Mgbuwoke, Ndele, Ngbere, Ngbereka, Ngbuobogizi, Nkpob, Nmehielle, Obelle, Obohia, Obungner-Unimini, Odegu, Odoha, Ogbakiri, Ogbelebaa, Ogbola, Ohamyim, Ohioomuigwemi, Oluonugbuda, Omaibo, Omeke, Omenala, Omi Dikanuaji, Omohia, Omokpiriku, Omorihuru, Omota, Omu Agala, Omu Agiri, Omu Amah, Omu Chip, Omu Eechi, Omu Ibah, Omu Ika, Omulsuea, Omu Mbom, Omu Noromue, Omu Nwenea, Omu Nwibike, Omu-Nwenea, Omu-Ochani, Omu Sukuta, Omu Woka, Omu-Didenuaji, Omuade, Omuabali, Omu-agbaoke, Omuagula, Omuali, Omuama, Omuanaa, Omuaza, Omuchioha, Omuchiou, Omudedede, Omueti, Omuika, Omueze, Omuikea, Omuishioha, Omukoro, Omumonyor, Omuoda, Omuogboi, Omuoji, Omuokiedinma, Omuokpata, Omuordin, Omuordu, Omuorupu, Omuosa, Omuosu, Omuotam, Omuovona, Omuse/Omusemge-lela, Onimini, Onimuli, Onimili-Oji, Orlu-Igbaa, Osa, Ovogo, Rumeelni, Rumeoro, Rumewhor, Rumiji, Rumodogo, Rumou Kparae Kah, Rumuagor, Rumuebagwor, Rumuekpa, Rumuigbaa, Rumuigwenya, Rumukani, Rumuohe, Rumuokwu, Ubimini, Udoha, Ukaeli, Ukwu waterside, Umudioga, Agbandele, Ahi Ogbakiri, Ahia Wokoma, Akpabu, Amapa, Bundele, Chio, Chiwokanwere, Egamini, Egbeda, Egbelu, Ehio, Eliprada, Ekunchara, Elele Alimini, Emohua, Ereku, Eza Nkpokwu, Hiamali, Ibaa, Ibomimere, Ikungachinwo, Imere Isodu, Itu, Izuoya, Mbuama, Mbuegizi, Mechiemechi, Mgbu Ehinimi, Mgbu Igobo, Mgbu Ika, Mgbu Ogbakiri, Mgbuajah, Mgbuakni, Mgbuateta, Mgbuayim, Mgbuealalu, Mgbuedah, Mgbuelia, Mgbuennubade, Mgbuetor, Mgbutanwo.

### **Significant peculiarity associated with Iwhuroha people**

**Language:** even though there may be pronounced differences in some words and inflexions. The Iwhuroha (Ikwerre) people tend to have one language – which is Ikwerre dialect and the dialect is quite distinct from those of her other close neighbours of Ijaw, Ibo, Ekpeye, Ogba, Etche, Eleme, Tai, Ogoni, Okirika and Abua/Odua languages; this language peculiarity or factor is an element in Ikwerre origin which creates an easy identification and classification of a set of ethnic group in relationship to the discovery of whom the people are in their area of inhabitation and dwelling which review their common dialect or language with associated cultural linkage perhaps draw their similarity together as indicators for understanding each other in their pronunciation differences in their Ikwerre dialect.

### **Cultural Relativity**

Extensively related with the culture of Iwhuruoha (Ikwerre) people is the cultural affinity of all the Ikwerre clans, towns, villages and communities as delineated in the various spatial distributions of Iwhuruoha (Ikwerre) people. There cultural similarity is very pronounced and related in the areas of dancing, as well as music-playing in the use of xylophone, (Wohgolo, local guttar (Ubor), etc. freestyle, wrestling is also a major social activities in all the towns and villages in Ikwerre areas of dwelling.

In terms of their fashion and mode of building as well as farming activities, etc are all similar in most of the Iwhuruoha (Ikwerre) towns and villages if not all the areas in Iwhuruoha clans. Most annual festivals like Okepiaigue in (Akpor clan), which involves the eating of new yam in the area, wrestling festival which is most generally associated with Ikwerre clans, Heajoku – which is majorly celebrated by Omerelu, Ota-Aji (Omudioga and Egbeda, Henwonsji (Omerelu), Agbadi/Heozu Elele and Elele-Alimini), etc., all have great similarity and relativity in ceremonial status and significant in purpose in terms of their cultural relativity.

Extensively related again in their cultural creativity is the traditional rights, there has always been a well-



defined seniority order with all the attendant traditional rights and privileges. Even in an excessively democratic society; the traditional rights and the respects of the senior persons and or group in terms of kindred is highly cherished and preserved except in exceptional cases where sacrilege may have been committed with such senior person or village that may warrant the denial of such seniority rights, like in the case of Akpor clan where (Ozuoba village, heads the rest communities in the clan instead of Rumuokparali village as the first son of Akpor).

Another cultural, significance tying the Iwhuruoha (Ikwerre) people in terms of relativity) is the institution of Oha which is very peculiar and distinct in heritage in each Iwhuroha (Ikwerre community). The Oha member (meaning nye oha) is a member of the group of compound or community that make up the Oha, and they are normally sited in the order of seniority, that is from the oldest and usually the Owhor holder of the family compound or community; it is important to note that in Ikwerre clans, the institution of Oha is never politicized; traditionally, it has a very strong inheritance system, it can hardly be abused or manipulated and because of its sacred nature, it is normally being achieved by the status of age, honesty and integrity and not by personality or richness in the society; and this is concretely embedded deeply in their social structure and as such leadership or rulership is by seniority; a member of Oha is supposedly endowed with wisdom and righteously guided by his people and usually devoid of being deviciously suspicion with deviant behavior in the community; above all, the Oha group takes care of individual and collective quarrels in the various villages, and normally the Oha group is not composed of women, they are only made up of aged men and elders in the village who has reached that limit of age status in the community; probably because the Iwhuruoha people practice the patrilineal system of inheritance (a system that allows only male child to inherit their fathers properties).

### **Conclusion**

The Iwhuruoha (Ikwerre) people are geographically spread into four local government areas in Rivers State and part of Imo State in Ohaji. They are made up of clans, kindreds, villages, communities and towns.

The Iwhuruoha (Ikwerre) people are the largest in Rivers State and have a distinct linguistic and tribal structure which distinguishes them from their other neighbours, tribes like the Ogoni, Kalagbaris, Ekpeyes and Ibos. Their routes and settlements have been traced from divers opinion of theories, while some opine from old Benin Empire, Akalaka, many has asserted that Iwhuroha (Ikwerre) people has a traceable lineage with the Ibos (Aruchukwu, Awka and Orlu).

The Iwhuruoha people today has increased in their area of settlement and has in the past two decades increased both in land mass and population as the area of Iwhuruoha people harbour people of different nationality and as such the area is speedily developing with the influence of various institutions and other state and federal structures is currently putting a new face in the spatial distribution of Iwhuruoha (Ikwerre) people in the state.

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