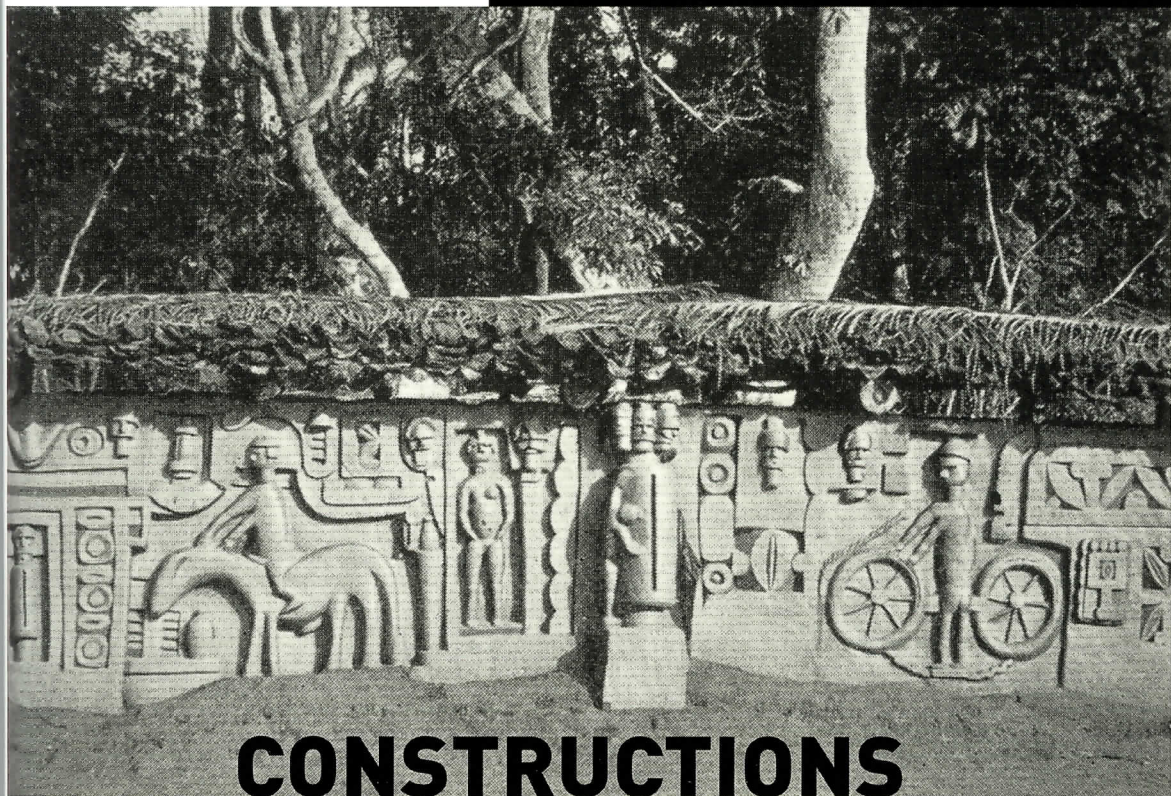




Axel Harneit-Sievers



CONSTRUCTIONS OF BELONGING

Igbo Communities
AND THE NIGERIAN STATE
in the Twentieth Century

CONSTRUCTIONS OF BELONGING



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Axel Harneit-Sievers



UNIVERSITY OF ROCHESTER PRESS

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NOTES ON ORTHOGRAPHY AND PLACE NAMES

For terms in the Igbo language, this book uses the “official” (“Onwu”) orthography employing a Latin script supplemented by three sub-dotted vowels (*ĩ, ọ, ụ*). Tone marks have been omitted, as is common except in linguistic publications and some teaching material.

Contemporary names of specific communities are provided according to the common practice in Igboland today, using a hierarchy of terms in ascending order from a local unit to the level of the federal state, from left to right in the description. Thus, a description such as “Ibagwa, Nike, Enugu East, Enugu” refers to Ibagwa village within Nike community, which is a village group (colloquially called a “town”) that may, or may not, constitute an administratively defined autonomous community. Nike is part of Enugu East Local Government Area (LGA), which is one of seventeen LGAs (as of the year 2000) in Enugu State (one of Nigeria’s thirty-six states). Due to the segmentary structure of Igbo society and depending on the context, there may be more (referring to a village quarter, for example) or less (referring to an entire community) terms on the lowest level, that is, on the left-hand side of the description. The term furthest to the right refers to the state (unless the state is obvious from the context).

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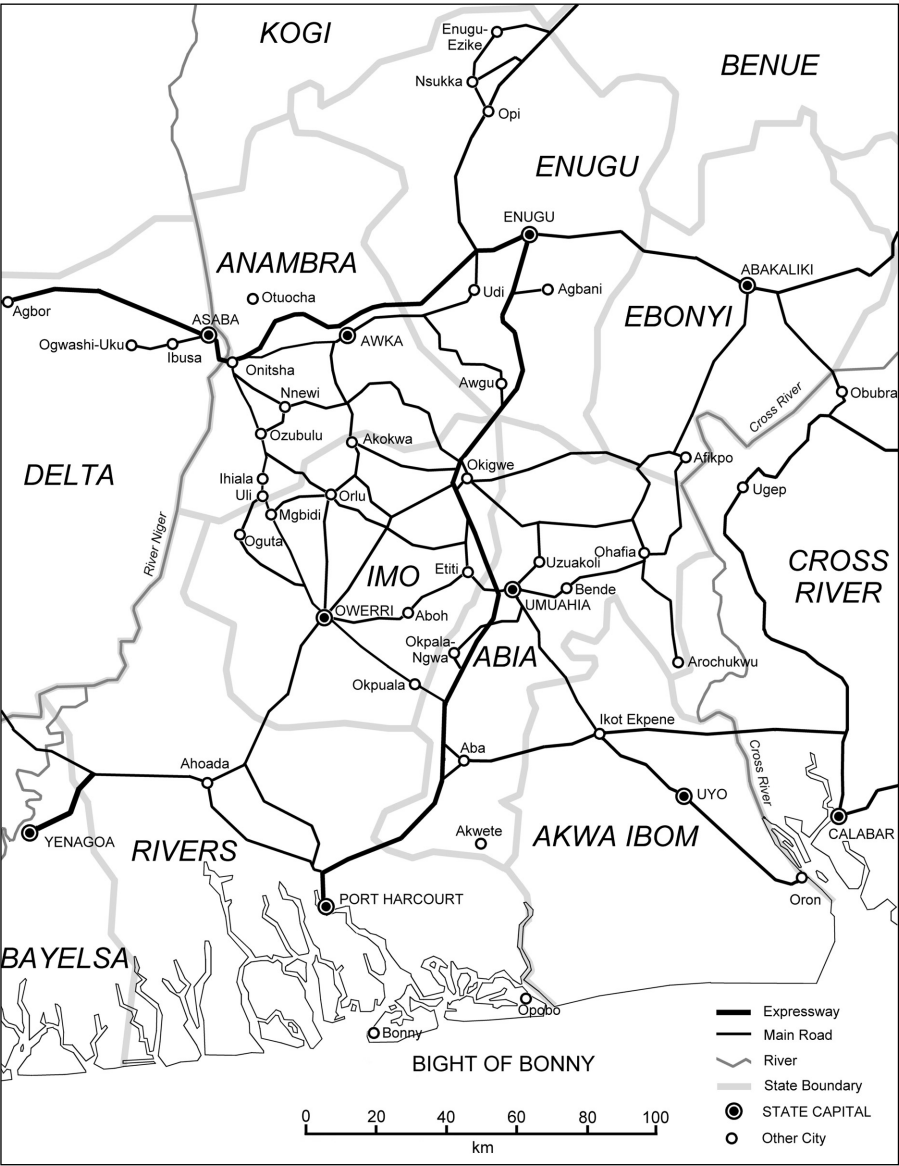
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My wife Barbara Sievers and our children were not always happy when research visits to Nigeria lasted for too long. But they never hesitated to support my pursuit of this project. At the same time, my family always enjoyed the presence of Nigerians and “things Nigerian” at home in Hamburg. I dedicate this book to my children, who were very young when this project started: my daughter Rixta Funmilayo, and my son Justus Obiajulu.

Axel Harneit-Sievers

January 2006



Map I.1. Southeastern Nigeria. Map created by author.

INTRODUCTION

This book is a history of local communities in southeastern Nigeria since the late nineteenth century. It is about the processes that shaped, changed, and reproduced communities; about the meanings that people belonging to particular communities give to them, and the uses they make of them. This book is about the processes that make African communities work and continue to be relevant in a world dominated by the modern territorial state and by worldwide flows of people, goods, and ideas.

“Indigeneity” matters in Nigeria. While not even a headword in the *Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary*, the term is common in contemporary Nigerian English, reflecting the relevance of the principle in the everyday life of Nigerians. To be an “indigene” of a certain place means to have been born in, or “descend from,” a specific *local community*—a place that can be identified on an administrative map or in the official gazette. To be an indigene does not require residence; it usually means to be identified, by birth or link of ancestry, with a particular *community of origin*. This implies certain rights and entitlements, such as access to land or security in times of crisis. In Nigeria today, to be an indigene of a particular community (and of the federal state in which it is set) may also imply the right of access to government-administered resources, such as educational facilities, civil service jobs, and business contracts. For every Nigerian today, belonging to a particular local community by being its indigene has important implications for the individual’s opportunities in numerous dimensions of life.

While the terms “indigene” and “indigeneity” may be somewhat peculiar to Nigeria, the principle behind them is not. Although local and national boundaries are supposed to lose relevance in an era of globalization, the erection of new boundaries, or the strengthening of existing ones, is the order of the day. Belonging to a certain community—be it a local, ethnic, religious, or national one—defines much of an individual’s identity. To some degree independent of an individual’s wealth and resources, it may also define whether an individual may be able to achieve his or her socioeconomic aspirations: by providing access to schooling, to jobs, or to a visa enabling travel outside Nigeria. In situations of intercommunal warfare or “ethnic cleansing,” belonging to the “right” community may even determine the person’s physical survival.

The “politics of belonging” has become a ubiquitous phenomenon since the late twentieth century. It is by no means restricted to rabid ethno-nationalisms in

some marginal corners of the world. The rising tide of forms of the politics of belonging concerns Western liberal intellectuals in their debates with communarians who cherish “community” and attribute an intense moral dimension to it (Mason 2000). Old and new forms of community self-definition—by ethnicity or locality, by gender or sexual preference—have become relevant in Western Europe and the United States, by way of “identity politics” that secure rights and access to resources (Cooper 1998). International migration has weakened traditional concepts of citizenship within the nation-state, giving way to a “politics of belonging” around multiple identities (Castles and Davidson 2000). Sometimes, an individual may have a great deal of discretion in deciding upon his or her belonging to a particular community. There is much less choice, however, if belonging is primarily defined in terms of “origin,” as in Nigeria.

This book is about local communities in Igboland, that is, the densely settled Igbo-speaking area of southeastern Nigeria with perhaps 15 million inhabitants by the year 2000.¹ Igboland extends through five of Nigeria’s thirty-six states (plus some areas in neighboring states), comprising 95 local government areas (LGAs) and up to a thousand “autonomous communities” (an administrative category). The core term defining the local community in Igboland is the “town”—the colloquial term for a group of villages with a common sense of identity and common institutions, though not necessarily a single political or administrative unit. It is what social scientists studying Nigeria often call the “home town” (Abbott 1999; Honey and Okafor 1998; Trager 2001)—even though Igbo people themselves rarely use this term. Despite its name, the Igbo town usually has a “rural” character, distinguishing it from the modern (“urban,” “cosmopolitan”) “city” that has a majority of inhabitants who originated elsewhere.

The Igbo village group called a “town” is a community of (actual or presumed) origin. Before the advent of British colonialism around 1900, Igboland consisted of a multitude of villages and towns without a centralized form of political organization. Some administrative autonomous communities in Igboland today are equivalent to a town; others are not (and they are usually smaller). Until today, Igbo towns form highly relevant foci of identity of their indigenes, and they are significant political arenas with a considerable degree of autonomy. This is noteworthy not only because Igbo local communities have been embedded in the administrative machinery of a state for about a century, first under British colonialism and since 1960 within independent Nigeria. It is also remarkable because Igboland is—perhaps even more markedly than other areas of Africa—involved in larger networks of economic interdependence, migration, and communication.

Through the slave trade, Igboland has been part of the transatlantic commercial system since the eighteenth century. From the colonial period onward, it has been intensely penetrated by the Christian religion and modern, formal education. In the course of the twentieth century, virtually every person in Igboland became connected to the market economy. Millions of Igbo are involved in commercial activities, extending from the local foodstuff trade to transcontinental business. Due to their relatively high educational standards, Igbo are prominent

within the Nigerian civil service and educational institutions throughout Nigeria. Several million Igbo migrants live outside their local communities, in urban centers of the region or elsewhere in Nigeria, in other parts of Africa, and elsewhere. According to a common joke, if there is any place in the world where you won't find an Igbo person, it must be entirely uninhabitable.

At the same time, most Igbo migrants—the “sons abroad,” as they are usually called, whether they live close by in a city within the region or far away on a different continent—try to keep intense ties to their community of origin. They visit frequently, organize hometown associations (“town unions”) in the “diaspora” and thereby attempt to influence life and development “at home” (see also Bersselaar 2005). Within many “home” communities themselves, there is intense social and political competition, showing the importance attached to them by the resident population as well as by migrants. Competition between different communities is also strong. Many other Nigerians perceive “the Igbo” as “tribalists,” forming cohesive groups to defend their interests. Most Igbo themselves, however, perceive their group as fragmented, finding it difficult to develop a common ethnic political agenda or to unite under a commonly accepted political leader.

The persistence of individuals' affiliation to local communities has puzzled analysts of African society for decades. Josef Gugler (1971), for example, looking at the rural-urban divide in Igboland from the perspective of the binary approach of modernization theory that contrasted “traditional” and “modern” spheres, spoke of a “dual system” within which urban Africans acted. His—classical—answer to the apparent paradox was that the modernization of these societies is still incomplete; that the inability of the economic system and of the state to provide security forces the individual to ultimately rely on communal bonds. Over time, “development” was expected to bring about integration and render rural local communities less central to the life and survival of Africans. More recently, however, social change appears less unidirectional. After decades of failed hopes for development, Gugler (1995), in a reconsideration of his earlier work, noted that the increasing weakness of the African state and the disastrous effects of economic crisis since the 1980s are strengthening once again the role of communal bonds, as a possible fallback position. Under these conditions, “the village” gains a new relevance “as a source of power in the politics of belonging” (Geschiere and Gugler 1998: 313).

The persistent and even renewed relevance of the local community is not merely a matter of individual pragmatic choice or of emotional attachment to a place called “home.” A sociopolitical system that encourages and reinforces the principle of indigeneity imposes belonging. An obvious case in point is Nigeria's postcolonial political order—with its numerous instances of communal, ethnic, and religious violence that forces people to retreat to a secure home base, and with the “federal character” principle it operates. Igbo society had a particularly traumatic experience in this regard before and during the Civil War years (1966–70). But agencies standing outside of the local context began to impose definitions of belonging much earlier—right at the beginning of the colonial

period, when the colonial state defined administrative units and made their inhabitants subjects of a particular chief. Thus, definitions of communal belonging and the modern territorial state are inextricably intertwined.

This book takes what is known about precolonial Igbo community structures as the starting point of an inquiry into forms of communal (self-)definition over the twentieth century. It identifies four key “external” factors that shaped and changed the Igbo town in the course of the twentieth century: colonialism, Christianity, political ethnicity, and the postcolonial state. It also looks at three major areas of “internal” self-definition of the community: the town unions, the creation of neotraditional institutions, and local historians and their works. This book looks at how “internal” and “external” factors interacted and how, in numerous instances, the twentieth-century Igbo community became an arena of intense competition and conflict. Some of these struggles were about political power in a straightforward sense. Others were about hegemony in more symbolic ways—for example, control over “tradition.” Others, again, were attempts by emerging elite groups (such as Christian converts) or hitherto marginalized groups (such as slaves) to achieve an acceptable place for themselves within local society. In the course of the twentieth century, the Igbo local community was not only an arena of local political competition for power, legitimacy, and prestige. I also look at it as a case of “local-level politics” in Swartz’s (1969) sense: an arena where local contests and struggles are influenced by the immersion of “the local” in wider contexts which provide resources that are employed as weapons in local contests.

The “Construction” of Community

Since the 1990s, “constructivist” approaches have dominated the social sciences and humanities. They treat phenomena of the social world—such as “community,” “class,” or “nation”—not as “things” but as the results of processes of production and reproduction that operate by means of continuous communication and interaction. Much “construction” of the social world is symbolic, either directly in the minds of individuals or indirectly in the form of material symbols that convey meaning. Constructivism shows that phenomena which once seemed natural, stable, primordial, and homogenous—categories that were frequently described with the use of organic metaphors (such as the “body politic”), as either unchanging and ahistorical, or as subject to processes of unidirectional evolution—have actually been “made.” Thus, constructivism *deconstructs* them at the same time.

In African studies, “tradition” has been analyzed as “invented” (Ranger 1983), the “nation” as “imagined” (Anderson 1983), ethnicity as “constructed” (Lentz 1998), and “locality” as “produced” (Appadurai 1995). Anthony P. Cohen’s (1993) study of the community as “symbolically constructed” is of particular relevance to this book, as Cohen extensively considers the role of historical consciousness

in the making of the local community. In academic analysis, the constructivist paradigm has largely replaced “essentialist” views of society and community, nation and ethnicity, custom and tradition. To the historian, perhaps the most attractive aspect of constructivism is the fact that it constitutes an invitation to historicize categories which once appeared given, natural, stable, and fixed. It allows reflection not only on the emergence and change of the phenomena concerned but also on the malleability of the categories themselves.

While constructivism reigns paramount in academics, essentialism is retaining its stance as the emic perspective of those who are part of a local, ethnic, or national community. Essentialist reasoning about community gained strength with the emergence of ethno-nationalisms that assert ancient foundations of national roots. The local community constitutes one of the categories that are especially prone to an essentialist perception. For the individual, the local community may invoke a peculiar sense of attachment, belonging, and “home,” stemming from an individual’s biography. A particular local community becomes of fundamental importance—in everyday practice or in memory—if an individual was born or grew up in it, lives there today, or lived there at some point of time in the past. More indirectly, the local community may be important because an individual views himself or herself as linked to it by descent. Beyond individual perceptions, a local community may become a focus of group identity in similar ways. Thus, an individual’s identity of being attached to a particular local community is even to some degree independent of individual residence or kinship. Because of its fundamental importance in individual experience and group identity, the local community acquires an essentialist image among many of its members.

To take a constructivist look at the local community means to take those perceptions apart, while still taking them seriously. It means to dissect the assumptions that people who are less concerned with the intricacies of social theory have about fundamental aspects of their own world. At the same time, the constructivist approach toward the local community has to acknowledge that it does not deal with entirely “invented” and infinitely malleable concepts.² A parallel can be drawn to the study of ethnicity in Africa: After one or two decades of studies that rightly focused on the “invention of tribalism” (by the colonial state, missionaries, and local intellectuals), awareness grew that the concepts of the ethnic group were usually built on “raw material” that was already available. Such material was provided, for example, by identities revolving around powerful precolonial states (such as Asante, Benin, or Ethiopia)³ or common concepts of origin, often linked to a legendary founder of regional religious significance (such as Oduduwa and the Ife link for the precolonial Yoruba city states in southwestern Nigeria). Students of ethnicity began to search for those precolonial forms of identity upon which ethnic identity was built in the colonial period (Lentz 1995). This book shows that the same is true for the historical analysis of the “construction” of the local Igbo community: Forms of precolonial local identity—especially the idiom of kinship used to define intra- and intercommunal relationships—continued to be used in the self-definition of local communities

in the twentieth century, and the use of the idiom of kinship is probably as widespread today as it was a hundred years ago. However, the concrete details of the genealogical narratives turn out to be very flexible and, in many cases, are re-constructed according to current needs and interest.

The Global, the Local, and the State

The constructivist perspective on society reflects a perception of the world whose only constant feature, as many would see it, is change. It thus reflects the processes of economic and cultural globalization which have accelerated since the 1980s and brought about increased economic, social, and informational exchange, led to greater flexibility (and insecurity), and weakened the boundaries of units of social identification and their power to produce social cohesion, be they nation states or local communities.⁴

In many areas, most visibly in popular culture, processes of globalization have led to an increasing degree of similarity all over the world—to *homogeneity*, certainly on the phenomenological level, with a certain degree of standardization of goods and cultural styles. However, despite widely held perceptions to the contrary, globalization has not resulted in “Americanization.” Instead, *heterogeneity* persists, and it is even fueled by globalization processes themselves, for at least three major reasons. First, and most obviously for Africa, globalization processes have tended to increase, rather than reduce, socioeconomic inequality on the international scale. Even the Internet—the apex of global communication and commerce where distances are believed not to matter any more and “space” tends to lose its meaning—reproduces, and possibly even increases, existing international inequalities, as shown by any cartography of its access points and data flows (Dodge and Kitchin 2001). Second, the late twentieth-century processes of globalization are not unidirectional. African products enter Western markets and households, as does music and art, while networks of migration and diaspora formation intensify. Third, globalization involves appropriation by those who are commonly perceived to be on its receiving end. Identical consumer goods may carry very different meanings in different societies, as they can among different social strata within one society. Ideas may be appropriated and reinterpreted in a multitude of ways—the history of Christianity in Africa and the recent emergence of numerous new churches (both locally based and internationally connected) provide impressive cases in point (Gifford 1994; Jeff Haynes 1996). Nigeria’s new film industry (“Nollywood”) is an excellent example of adaptation, as well as of the exchanges made possible by global cultural and technological exchanges (Jonathan Haynes 2000). Individuals, groups, communities, and entire societies may decide to appropriate certain aspects of what they encounter in the globalized world; they may adapt and reinterpret them; they may also decide to dissociate themselves from them, building barriers against them.

Globalization, thus, has both homogenizing and heterogenizing effects. Rather than assume that the local always tends to be overwhelmed by the global, it is necessary to study their interaction in detail. In the midst of processes that make seemingly well-established units and boundaries disappear, old forms of identity and community survive, adapt, and change, and new ones emerge. Some of these communities are not only new but also present themselves as decidedly modern in character—such as the virtual communities of the Internet, or the myriad of youth sub-cultures all over the Western world. Others, however, claim historical continuity, or even a primordial character. The various ways of dealing with influences that come from (or are perceived to come from) outside of any given community and transform it, by specific forms of appropriation, form important themes of this book. One aspect is the role of formal schooling and the forms of knowledge that arrived with it—about “history,” for example. Another is the Christian “world religion” that interacts with the local social environment and local belief systems. There are many more.

Many manifestations of globality spread throughout the world not by themselves but through the medium of the modern *territorially defined nation-state*. The world-wide establishment of territorial states in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has left no part of the world’s landmass unoccupied, and even applies to a large part of the open seas. The spread of the principle of the territorially defined nation state itself constitutes a major process of globalization. While recent debates about globalization tend to describe the role of the nation-state, and its capacity to control, as diminishing in the face of global dynamics, the organizing principle of a world consisting of nation-states has not been abandoned. This is even true for much of Africa, where “weak states” are confronted by “strong societies” (Migdal 1988) and where the legitimacy of the state and its capacity for policy enforcement are low. While local autonomy—to survive without the state, to disengage from it (Baker 2000), or even to resist it—is strong, the principle of the nation-state remains largely unquestioned even in cases of manifest state collapse.

In historical perspective, the modern nation-state has been a homogenizing agency *par excellence*. It not only established territorially unified systems of government, administration, and jurisdiction. It also standardized weights and measures, educational qualifications, and languages. State intervention meant control by means of unification and standardization, of people, space, and nature: Population censuses, mapping (Anderson 1983), and large-scale development schemes (Scott 1998) can be read as attempts to get control over the bewildering diversity of local societies, economies, and cultures, and to reduce the complexity of “real life” within the territory under a state’s control. Many such processes of standardized intervention did not refer much to local specifics, capabilities, and knowledge; in consequence, many of them produced irrelevant results—or simply failed.

In most of Africa, the modern state arrived as a *colonial state*. In many places, its arrival implied a major break with the previously existing forms of political organization. Igboland is a marked case in point. Here, the modern state was superimposed, usually by manifest violence, or through the threat of violence.

Especially in the early decades, the British-imposed “decentralized despotism” (Mamdani 1996) of warrant chief rule paid little respect to existing social and political structures. However, despite its often violent character, colonial state power did not penetrate local societies to the same extent as in Europe, and the homogenizing effects of the state have remained less comprehensive. The heterogeneity and—frequently—incompatibility between political cultures on the local and state levels, resulting in two separate spheres of governance (or “two publics,” according to Ekeh 1975), is a major reason for Africa’s contemporary problems of dysfunctional state institutions and political instability. The analysis of the history of Igboland in this book addresses the existence of these separate spheres, but also the multitude of interconnections between them and the processes of negotiation that take place along the borderline.

But what is “the local,” and where is its “place”? In colloquial language, everybody appears to know the answer: “Local” refers to a small-scale unit, the life of which is based on direct interaction between those who populate it. The local often carries the notion of the “particular,” that is, something distinct from a more general, national, or worldwide context. However, to define the local simply as the particular—as the other side, or the opposite, of large-scale processes and institutions—implies conceptualizing it in an essentialist manner: as an independent social entity with foundations that remain fundamentally unaffected by those very large-scale processes. This is not the approach taken in this book, which looks at the local as a social entity that not only produces and reproduces itself in continuous interaction among its members, but also in interaction—by exchange, appropriation, and dissociation—with larger contexts. Thus, the local is not an unproblematic starting point. It is a useful category only when applied in relation to something beyond it. The local is necessarily embedded, and there are two options by which to conceptualize this relationship.

One option is to view the local in relation to a larger but limited context within which localities share common features that distinguish them from the wider world.⁵ Examples are the anthropologist’s or historian’s construct of the “culture area” or—more recently—what Steven Feierman (2000), looking at precolonial Africa, has called the “regional configurations of the social”: common sociopolitical and cultural patterns on a regional level (such as “public healing” by spirit media or shrines: see chapter 2) to which historians have to apply somewhat deficient “Western” terms that still require much additional explanation. This approach may be called the “additive” view of the local, in which numerous instances of local peculiarities define the character or quality of a larger whole.

Another option with which to look at the embedded character of the local is to view it as the opposite of some overarching entity: a region, a state, a supranational structure, or even human society in its entirety. This may be called the “hierarchical” view of the local: Localities are viewed as belonging not only to something larger but as belonging to something “supra-local” that is of a higher order than themselves, and fundamentally different. Such an approach invites the use of binary oppositions—the local versus the global, local society versus the state. It also frequently

goes along with notions of deficiency, with the local lacking something that the larger whole has (e.g., access to resources, “modernity” of culture and lifestyle, etc.). Sometimes, this line of thinking is turned upside down, by attributing a degree of authenticity to the local that the larger whole lacks (e.g., notions of “local knowledge” or of “village democracy” as against a corrupt and authoritarian African state).

Both the additive and the hierarchical perspectives on the local provide valid starting points for its analysis. They both point to the fact that clear-cut borderlines, easily assumed to exist between an essentialized local on the one hand and a dynamic larger whole (on whatever level) on the other, become blurred when looking at them more closely. Depending on the scale chosen for the larger whole, the local itself can be conceptualized on very different levels of scale—from the village ward to an entire continental subregion unified by certain cultural features. The difference between the two views is also a matter of the agency attributed to either side: the additive perspective views a locality, or rather a number of localities, as active contributors to the larger whole. The hierarchical perspective stresses the agency of the larger whole, directed from the top to the (local) bottom that tends to stand at the receiving end. The difference between the additive and the hierarchical perspective is thus also reflected in Arjun Appadurai’s (1996) characterization of “locality” as being both “context-generating” and “context-driven,” providing a terminological framework with which to study opportunities and limitations inherent to the local.

Mainly due to Appadurai’s work, the concept of locality has received a great deal of prominence in recent years. Somewhat less polluted by the essentialist notions of “community,” “locality” focuses specifically on relationships within small-scale contexts, usually based on direct interaction between people. While the term “community” may be used in a very broad sense to comprise any group of people with a shared identity—from a local face-to-face group to the “imagined community” of the nation or even humanity as a whole—“locality” does not even require an awareness of belonging together, but may simply refer to “lived ‘co-presence’” (Appadurai 1996: 42). The recent prominence of “locality” as an analytical concept reflects the growing relevance of multicultural communities in the urban centers of the West and even allows us to speak of “translocalities” emerging from “human motion in the context of the crisis of the nation-state” (ibid.), bypassing traditional restrictions of spatiality in the era of globalization.

As an analytical concept, locality operates without specific assumptions about the character of “the ties that bind,” focusing on concrete forms of interaction. This may be an advantage in many contexts, avoiding the baggage of essentialism carried along with the term community. Still, from the perspective taken in this book, locality cannot replace community as a core analytical concept, for three reasons. First, in southeastern Nigeria’s Igbo society there *are* numerous “ties that bind” unrelated to “lived ‘co-presence’”—from kinship relationships to ethnic, religious, and political loyalties. Second, an analytical focus on locality does not greatly help us to understand forms of identity, which are not bound to, and are largely independent of, the principles of space, place, and territoriality. Igbo

local communities of Igboland have well-defined locations on the map; their members, though dispersed over various parts of the world, have clear concepts of what is “home.” In their case, the symbolic importance of a specific locality may be just the opposite of the “lived ‘copresence’” stressed in the locality concept. Third, the conceptualization of locality as being both “context-generating” and “context-driven,” while rightly stressing that there is a two-way interaction between the local and the global (or the nation-state), may obscure the asymmetries of power that often characterize the relationships between the two.

The Making of Igbo Local Communities: An Outline

While appreciating the intellectual stimulation brought about by recent debates on locality, this book still prefers to work with the term “local community” when studying Igbo society. However, some qualifications are necessary to draw a distinction between the usage of the term here and common—popular or academic—forms of usage.

First, the term “local community,” as used here, refers to a group whose members share an awareness of belonging to a specific place of residence or origin. In Igboland, such a community comprises several thousand people and consists of what ethnographers have called the “village group” (*obodo* in Igbo; “town” in English). This local community is too large, and a considerable number of its members are too far dispersed, to be constituted solely or primarily by face-to-face interaction in everyday life. But it is small and relevant enough to make many of its members to act within its boundaries, and to depend on it, in numerous aspects of their lives. Thus, the term community is employed as an emic concept, escaping attempts at definitional rigor, even though it frequently has an administratively defined territorial dimension to it. To speak of “local community” in Igboland involves a measure of imprecision—and this reflects local usage. Depending on the context, the attribute “local” may refer to any of several hierarchically structured layers (wards, villages, the village group).

Second, the structures and even the very concept of the local community are subject to change over time. While some of these changes are hotly debated locally, others remain imperceptible to members of a community who often define the local community by references to its internal “content,” stressing its particular “character” and that of its people, its history, and its culture. Such references to historical and cultural “substance” form an important element of the emic discourse, as Anthony P. Cohen (1993) noted:

[I]t is the very imprecision of these references to the past—timelessness masquerading as history—which makes them so apt a device for symbolism and, in particular, for expressing symbolically the continuity of past and present, and for re-asserting the cultural integrity of the community in the face of its apparent subversion by the forces of change. (103)

[W]hether or not its structural boundaries remain intact, the reality of community lies in its members' perception of the vitality of its culture. People construct community symbolically, making it a resource and repository of meaning, and a referent of their identity. (118)

Local discourses about history and culture form an important aspect of this book. Statements about the past and about presumably common and shared cultural features have to be looked at critically, but should not be presumed to be mere inventions; they have to be built on something in order to become acceptable. Anthropologists "would be more inclined to treat myth as an expression of the way in which people cognitively map past, present and future" (Cohen 1993: 99). Historians prefer to critically evaluate the usefulness of legends of origins and similar myths as source material that may contain information about the past—and they have to accept that there are boundaries beyond which their inquiry cannot reach (e.g., when it comes to questions of "origins").

Third, a local community is defined and defines itself along its physical, social, and cultural boundaries. Drawing boundaries between "us" and "them" is essential to the development of any form of identity. Differences are stressed in relation to a "significant other," to somebody or something defined as external, alien, and so on.⁶ Local identity construction may proceed along the lines of the "additive" model sketched earlier, focusing on the small differences between "us" and "them" which still do not prevent "us" from belonging to a larger whole. It may also proceed along the lines of the "hierarchical" model, viewing "us" as opposed to something else that is fundamentally different, for example, "above us." Both forms of delineating community by boundary demarcation play a role in this book.

Fourth, some common, simple notions of community are clearly discarded in this book. One is that of homogeneity. The term "community" does not imply a homogenous or egalitarian social entity characterized by conformity among its members who are supposed to share a common interest. Even the question of who belongs to a community may be contested. The Igbo local community is a *local society* with a considerable amount of internal diversity in terms of social stratification, gender, age, ascribed status, and so on, with numerous lines of internal conflict. Another common but equally invalid notion is that of a community as being purely local in the sense that all of its members are physically "copresent" all or most of the time. In fact, a considerable number of them are not, but many of them remain involved in intense communication with "home." Thus, the Igbo local community has a notable "translocal" dimension to it. Still, this book employs the terminology common in Igbo society, speaking of people "at home" versus those "abroad" (or in the "diaspora").

Fifth, a constructivist approach to the study of the local community puts "agency" at the core of the analysis. Obviously, it is not only the agency of a community's members that counts. The "making" of communities refers to how they *make themselves*, that is, by the agency of their members. It also refers to how they

are made, by individuals and groups, and even more importantly, by large-scale structures (such as the state and even wider contexts) outside of their influence. Earlier, I have used the terms “self-definition” and “imposition,” respectively, to describe these two aspects of community construction. Both “external” and “internal” factors and influences are relevant in the making of the Igbo local community. The terms are used primarily as analytical categories with some heuristic value; in practice, there is much interaction and interference between the two sides. Some members of the local community are at the same time part of the larger contexts, for example, as local representatives of the Nigerian state, or as highly educated migrants to foreign countries carrying with them the luggage of globalized patterns of consumption, ideas about “progress” and “development,” and so on. Some other factors and phenomena—especially ethnicity—remain difficult to place on either side. However, it makes sense to separate, for analytical purposes, “internal” and “external” dimensions of community making, not least in recognition of the different relative weights that different influences had at different times.⁷

Finally, like any community, Igbo local communities convey a variety of meanings to their members. This variety is difficult to grasp in its entirety, and this book does not claim to look at all its aspects. It focuses on aspects that are important for the definition and self-definition of community as a social entity, in terms of politics and administration and in some of its social and cultural expressions. It is about the social and political history of Igbo local communities and their interactions with and within wider frameworks, especially the ethnic-regional context and the modern state. However, this book does not systematically look into many of the other forms of meaning that make the Igbo local community so important for its members. Being a historical study, it does not take a closer look at the mechanisms that build community on the micro-level, by delving into the sociopsychological dynamics that form an individual’s emotional or sentimental attachment to his or her local community,⁸ or by analyzing the details of the reproduction of the local by face-to-face interaction and communication processes in everyday life. Also, this book does not study the “senses of place” (Feld and Basso 1996) and does not systematically explore the role of local spatiality or the interplay between the “cultural and natural texture” (de Boeck 1998) of a place, that is, the processes by which landscape and landmarks, trees and rivers are made meaningful and serve as referents of “emplacement,” creating a sense of belonging to a particular locality (Lovell 1998).

This book combines a chronological with a systematic approach. Broadly speaking, it moves from the past to the present (especially in the first two parts), and from the general and regional perspective to a more specific and local one (the latter being most marked in the local case studies in part IV). The systematic chapters (parts II and III), which address specific factors and institutions of community definition and self-definition, are, again, internally organized chronologically.

The first part of this book provides an overview of the historical and ethnographic evidence for Igbo society. The starting point of analysis is defined by

summarizing the knowledge about *community structures* in Igboland before the colonial occupation (chapter 1), providing descriptions and definitions of core concepts. Of course, to start with the late nineteenth century does not imply that there was a static “precolonial Igbo society”; in fact, the nineteenth century brought major, well-documented economic and political changes in southeastern Nigeria. Chapter 2 looks at the *intercommunal* (“translocal”) *dimensions of precolonial society*: at the networks established by traders, by itinerant specialists of craft and ritual, and by religious institutions. It also discusses two precolonial “spheres of influence” in Igboland and traces the remarkable career of the idea of a precolonial “Nri hegemony” since the 1970s—a concept with a significant impact on academic and popular ideas about Igbo history and with increasing relevance as a focus of Igbo ethnic identity today.

The second part of this book focuses on the four key “external” forces that shaped Igbo local communities in the twentieth century. Chapter 3 analyzes British occupation strategies, the establishment of administrative structures and the creation of the institutions of *colonial rule*. The British drew administrative boundaries; they made (and, later on, unmade) administrative chiefs. All this shaped the boundaries of the Igbo local community and its internal power relationships. Chapter 4 looks at the history of *Christianity* in Igboland, discussing reasons for the remarkable success of conversion to Christianity and analyzing the policies of missionary churches *vis-à-vis* local communities and local institutions. Christian missions created communities of “church people” who were partially different from “town people” (i.e., non-Christians), and sometimes in open conflict with them. Chapter 5 analyzes *Igbo ethnicity*—the creation of a larger community ostensibly out of numerous local ones. At first sight, it may be surprising to see ethnicity treated as an “external” factor—given the popular concept of ethnic identity “growing from below.” However, I stress the role of specific “cultural workers” and ethnic politics for the development of Igbo ethnicity in the years before the Civil War/Biafran War (1967–70) and in its aftermath. Chapter 6 looks at the *post-colonial state* after 1970, tracing the dynamics and impact of Nigeria’s federal political order, based on the distribution of oil rents, down to the level of local communities in Igboland. “Down there,” the federal system begins to interact with local political competition and segmentary sociopolitical structures, resulting in a remarkable degree of administrative and political fragmentation. This chapter also illustrates some of the social disruptions arising from the socioeconomic crisis since the 1980s that shaped life in Igbo communities and in Igbo society in general, by the year 2000.

The third part of this book analyzes three major forms by which Igbo communities shaped themselves in the twentieth century. First, it addresses two core institutions that have emerged from the later colonial period onward. One of them is the *town union* (chapter 7) that, since the 1930s–40s, has constituted the most powerful form of communal self-organization in many Igbo communities. The rise of the town union reflected the rise to power of the modern local elite and its aspirations for “development” and political control. The relevance of the town union

model of local self-organization in Igboland is perhaps unparalleled anywhere in Africa. The other core local institution is that of the *traditional ruler* (chapter 8). Emerging in Igboland largely in the postcolonial period, traditional rulers have, since the 1970s, in many places increasingly challenged the town unions' role as the major focus of local self-organization. Furthermore, chapter 9 looks at *local historical writing* by nonacademic historians, an extraordinarily vivacious genre of writings in post-Civil War Igboland as instruments by which Igbo local communities (re-)define themselves. The interaction between local initiative and effort on the one hand, and the strong influence of concepts and structures derived from larger contexts—the nation state, modern educational systems etc.—on the other, constitute a major focus of the analysis in this part of the book.

The fourth part of this book, finally, goes beyond the general, regionally oriented account of the first three parts and presents *three case studies* of local communities from different parts of Igboland, following their history from the nineteenth century to the present. Common themes of all three chapters are the definition of boundaries and belonging, power contests in the local political arena, and the role of arguments about history in local political debates. In addition, each of the three case studies focuses on a theme that marks the history of each particular community: the dynamics of political competition and fragmentation within the community (chapter 10); the relevance of “history” and “culture” in the local and regional arena (chapter 11); and the role of stigmatization resulting from precolonial slavery in local social relationships and politics today (chapter 12).

PART I

Igboland: The Historical and Ethnographic Evidence

The Igbo-speaking area in southeastern Nigeria extends between 4°55'–7°05' N and 6°30'–7°45' E. As elsewhere in West Africa, the levels of rainfall and humidity decrease with distance from the coast, with a rainy season between April and October. Most of Igboland is situated within the oil palm belt, bordering on the coastal mangrove swamp in the south and the savanna in the north. The River Niger formed the western boundary of the colonial Eastern Region that included the major part of Igboland; in addition, a number of Igbo-speaking communities are found west of the river. In the east, Igbo communities extend close to, and some of them (Unwana, parts of Afikpo) reach, the Cross River (for geographic information, see Floyd 1969; Ofomata 1975, 2002).

For centuries, southeastern Nigerian agriculture was based on yam as the most important source of carbohydrates, the crop's importance being expressed in the rituals and honorary titles that many Igbo communities devote to it. Cassava, introduced from South America to West Africa in the seventeenth century, seems to have spread slowly and reached its current prominence only during the twentieth century; the production of rice started only in the 1940s. Besides these staple foods, numerous vegetables and fruits are grown. Oil and raffia palms are the most important "economic trees," providing the source of vegetable oil (for domestic use and as a cash crop) and palm wine, respectively. For communities in the "riverine" areas (close to the Niger and its delta), fishing is major source of livelihood. Due to the prevalence of trypanosomiasis, animal husbandry has been limited to the keeping of small stock.

Igboland includes some of the most densely settled areas in Africa. While there is considerable variation within the region, the 1963 census noted very high population densities of 400–600 persons per square kilometer in the Awka, Okigwe, and Orlu areas (Okorafo 2002: 140). Igbo farmers expanded over centuries through the area. But except in the frontier zones on the Cross River and in the northeast, where space for territorial expansion appears to have been available until more recently (see Jones 1949b), much of the population growth took place in areas where "internal colonization" was the only option. Today, soils in many areas are exhausted, and problems of erosion are widespread.

The extraordinarily high population density of Igboland has been somewhat puzzling to historians because of the role of the area as a source of supply for the transatlantic slave trade, primarily via Calabar and the Niger Delta ports. Even if the categories were not well defined at the time, slaves of Igbo origin constituted a strong, ethnically identifiable group among the slaves in the Atlantic trade and the New World (Chambers 1997: 76–77; Northrup 1978: 62). The high precolonial population density of the Igbo area, despite its prominence as a source of slaves, has been explained by the fact that the modes of slave acquisition involved a lower degree of warfare and large-scale slave raiding here than in other parts of Africa. Instead, kidnapping and sale of individuals for economic or religious reasons and after judicial procedures were important factors. Furthermore, the proportion of female slaves—whose sale had the most profound effects on an area's long-term demographic development—was lower here than elsewhere. This bundle of factors, David Northrup (1978: 80–84) argued, contributed to the limited overall demographic effect of the slave trade in southeastern Nigeria. However, Northrup's interpretation has been questioned by John Nwachimereze Orij (1986), who showed that raiding and warfare indeed played important roles in slave acquisition in Igboland, especially during the early nineteenth century. Thus, overall, the demographic dynamics of precolonial Igboland have not yet been satisfactorily explained.

Using the terminology employed today, the Igbo form one of the three major ethnic groups of Nigeria, the two others being the Yoruba in southwestern and the Hausa/Fulani in northern Nigeria. The Igbo-speaking areas are surrounded by a multitude of smaller ethnic groups who form minorities in Nigeria's twentieth-century ethno-political classification, even though some of them number several million people today, namely, Ijo, Ogoni, and smaller riverine groups to the south, Ibibio to the southeast, various Cross River groups (Mbembe, Yakö, Biase, Agwagune) to the east, Tiv, Igala, and Idoma to the north, and Edo (Bini), Isoko, and Urhobo to the west.

Precolonial Igboland consisted of numerous largely autonomous local units without any centralized political authority beyond the level of the village or village group, in marked contrast to the formation of precolonial states and empires in other parts of what constitutes Nigeria today, such as the Benin Empire, the Yoruba states in the southwest, and the Sokoto Caliphate and the Hausa/Fulani emirates in the north. As a cultural and sociopolitical area with a common ethnic consciousness and administrative boundaries, "Igboland" is a creation of the twentieth century (see chapter 5). Even the term "Igbo" (or "Ibo," a spelling that was common among nonlinguists up to the 1970s) seems to have emerged mainly as an expression outside Igboland—used by slave traders and shippers, by enslaved and freed Igbo people, by linguists and missionaries. While people generally described themselves by the names of their local settlements or village groups, the term "Igbo," as an ethnic self-description, became popular only during the colonial period.

Given the flexibility of the concept and the cultural diversity of Igbo society, the boundaries of Igboland are not always easy to draw. Some early maps and accounts extend the Igbo area close to the coast, including Opobo and Bonny (e.g., Talbot 1926, vol. 4: 40–41), reflecting the fact that a considerable part of the population in these coastal communities was of Igbo origin. Ascriptions and self-descriptions of groups considered to be Igbo remain in flux: Igbo-speaking groups such as the Ikwerre near Port Harcourt in Rivers State adapted their ethnic self-definition according to the political circumstances of the time, providing them a degree of security especially during and after the Civil War (Harneit-Sievers, Ahazuem, and Emezue 1997: 27). Arochukwu was administratively incorporated into the Igbo-speaking Onitsha Province only in the late 1950s and began to regard itself as being “fully” Igbo only during the Nigerian Civil War. Igbo groups west of the Niger similarly assert a distinct identity today, using the term “Anioma,” regarding themselves as marginalized by the Igbo political mainstream (Ohadike 1994). In most contexts—and in this book as well, if not specified otherwise—the term “Igboland” refers to the five Igbo-speaking states of the former Eastern Region of Nigeria (Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo) and to neighboring Igbo-speaking areas in Delta and Rivers states.

The following two chapters provide an outline of the history of Igboland up to the late nineteenth century, including a review of some important debates among historians, and summarize key concepts of social organization, based largely on anthropological research. The latter are usually *longue durée* phenomena; still, the assumption that these concepts have remained basically unchanged since the nineteenth century is somewhat risky. Igboland has been subject to internal change as well as interregional interaction over long periods. It has been incorporated into worldwide commercial networks since the seventeenth century, with some consequences for its internal structures. Today, many Igbo tend to compare critically the current state of their society with an idealized and static precolonial past—“our culture.” Some lines of research on Igbo society—especially the structural-functionalist mainstream of social anthropology dominant in the mid-twentieth century—had little to say about history and change in the precolonial past, partially reacting to earlier, highly speculative approaches. The historiography of precolonial Igboland has greatly advanced in recent decades, emphatically claiming that the Igbo *have* a history, and that this history can be traced, even if many questions remain open.

1

THE IGBO LOCAL COMMUNITY: HISTORICAL AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL APPROACHES

The historiography of precolonial Igbo society, that is, of Igboland before ca. 1900,¹ relies on a variety of sources and methodologies: linguistic and archaeological research, oral narratives and the products of their transformation into written accounts during the twentieth century, ethnographic and social anthropological studies (on political and kinship institutions, performances, and the arts), and a very limited number of written accounts by European visitors since the mid-nineteenth century.

Historical linguistics provides the earliest level of historical analysis. The Igbo language belongs to the Kwa subfamily of the larger Niger-Congo language family; glottochronology points to a point in time about 6,000 years ago when Igbo separated from proto-Kwa, assumed to be spoken in the Niger-Benue confluence area. Igbo has numerous dialects. Variations in spelling, grammar, or word use are common even among neighboring villages, creating a continuum of dialectal variation in Igboland that restricts mutual intelligibility among speakers of distant dialects. The Igbo literary standard developed since the late colonial period (see chapter 5) became only partially successful as a written vernacular; the Igbo educated elite continues to prefer English to written Igbo as means of communication even among itself. Within the large number of dialects—Pat Ndukwe (1992: 664) mentions estimates from 100 to 300, thereby indicating the uncertainty of classification—a smaller number of major dialect groups has been identified, but there is little agreement among Igbo linguists about them.² The linguistic evidence, overall, points at diversity in Igboland.

Archaeology has provided information about the history of settlements, technology and trade. Neolithic farming communities settled in Igboland at least from 1000 BCE onward (Chikwendu 1992: 72–74). Early concentrations of population, with developed ceramic production, have been identified around Nsukka and

Afikpo, but due to the sketchy evidence it remains unclear whether these were isolated centers or examples of a more general expansion of neolithic culture (Chikwendu 1992: 87–90). The famous archaeological finds at Igbo-Ukwu (Anambra State) showed that there was a society with an elaborate technology of metal (bronze) casting in the Anambra area by the tenth century CE (Shaw and University of Ibadan 1970; Shaw 1977). The analysis of the origin of beads and metal used in these and other finds showed long-standing long-distance trade connections between Igbo communities and areas further up the River Niger, extending to Gao and beyond (Insoll and Shaw 1997). Both archaeological and oral historical research provide evidence for connections between northern Igboland and the people of the wider Benue Valley, especially Idah, over several hundred years (Oguagha and Okpoko 1984; Sargent 1999: 252–59). The earliest remains of iron-smelting sites have been dated to about 1600 CE, probably directly connected to traditions of local blacksmithing that are strong in northern Igbo communities such as Awka and Ezeagu.

Oral historical narratives form the single most important source for the study of Igbo precolonial history. They tell about origins and migrations, often in mythical form, and relate to important events in a more recent past. Virtually all Igbo communities have such oral traditions. Being without the foundation myths and royal genealogies of precolonial states and empires in other parts of Africa, Igbo society usually had and has no equivalent to “professional” historical storytellers, such as the well-known Malian *griots* who were able to secure a certain degree of stability and standardization of narratives. Typically, Igbo oral traditions are transmitted by elderly individuals who are regarded as knowledgeable about history within the community itself but do not carry any “official” status as historians.³ Conflicting versions of oral histories and resulting contesting of historical accounts are, of course, common in all societies with a primarily oral culture. In this regard, the differences between Igbo communities and precolonial states in Africa appear not so much as differences in kind but differences in degree. However, Igbo oral traditions—like those of many noncentralized societies (R. Horton 1985: 88)—are usually characterized by a limited time depth: They tell about origins and early migrations on the one hand, and about persons and events of only a few generations ago on the other. They usually contain little information about the intermediate period, the chronological extent of which usually cannot even be discerned. They connect the loose ends between early and recent history by what has been called “telescoping,” that is, making individuals who must have lived many generations apart appear to have lived within a short-range generational interval, or even narratively collapsing them into a single individual. These features of Igbo oral historical narratives often make it difficult to extract “factual” historical information from them. Typical foundational legends of Igbo communities describe a founder and his sons as the originators of a village’s constituent segments and families, thereby establishing an order of seniority and prestige. Rather than as factual historical accounts, these stories frequently have to be understood as “communal charters” describing current social organization

and intra- and intercommunal relationships metaphorically, in the idiom of kinship and genealogy.

Many local oral historical narratives of Igboland have been put into writing in the course of the twentieth century. Academic histories based on the collection of oral sources began to be published since the late 1950s. Hundreds of BA “long essays” and other unpublished research findings on Igbo local history, usually employing oral sources, have emerged from the history departments of Nigerian universities over the decades. Igbo local historians, many nonacademics among them, have been writing and publishing books about the history and culture of their home communities since the colonial period, and have been doing so in ever-increasing numbers since the 1980s (see chapter 9). However, in many cases colonial officers, government anthropologists, and missionaries undertook the earliest documentation of contemporary culture and oral traditions. Much of this material was collected between the 1910s and the 1930s, relying on local informants who still had personal recollections of late nineteenth-century Igbo society before the onset of colonialism. Some of these materials formed the base for the earliest comprehensive studies of Igbo society (the most prominent examples are Thomas 1913; Basden 1921; Talbot 1926; Basden 1938), which are frequently still used today. Even more important in terms of quantity and geographical spread are the “intelligence reports” and other similar reports written by colonial administrative officers in the 1920s and 1930s, intended to serve as a basis for the native authority “reorganization” (see chapter 3). In many cases, they form the very first written account of a particular community’s oral historical traditions, as well as providing information about precolonial political and judicial organization. While the quality of the information contained differs and circumstances of data collection are often not documented, intelligence reports have been employed by many historians as a source of prime importance, not least because they are frequently—though not always rightfully—regarded as representing a picture of a pre- and early colonial local society relatively “unadulterated” by later local political conflicts and the strategic interests of informants. As a result of this intensive and sometimes uncritical use, intelligence reports have had a strong tendency to “feed back” into local historical narratives.

Beyond oral historical narratives, various dimensions of nonverbal contemporary culture—institutions, practices, and performances—which usually find the interest of social anthropologists, have been employed as sources for aspects of Igbo history as well. The comparative analysis of kinship structures in Igbo society has been employed to trace the history of settlement and lineage and clan fission and development (Ardener 1959). Landmarks and place names have been shown to link the ancestors to the living and to provide references to important events and individuals of the past (J. Njoku 1995; McCall 1995). Masquerade and dance performances during festivals reenact historical events and support the reproduction of a community’s social memory over time, often in conflicting variants (Bentor 1994; McCall 2000).

Recurrent Themes in Igbo Historiography: Origins, Migrations, Noncentralization

Historians of precolonial Igboiland have addressed two themes with a great deal of energy: the origins, migrations, and expansion of the Igbo; and the issue of precolonial “statelessness.”

The quest to identify “the origin of the Igbo” has been going on since Olaudah Equiano, a freed Igbo slave and abolitionist, published his autobiography in the late eighteenth century.⁴ Because of a number of apparent similarities between Igbo and Jewish culture, he speculated that the Igbo were one of the lost tribes of Israel—and numerous writers since then have followed this line. This view of Igbo origins has gained some prominence among local authors (Ike 1951) and even academics (Alaezi 1999). Today, the idea of a Middle Eastern origin of the Igbo pervades oral historical accounts.⁵ Of course, numerous groups throughout Africa make similar claims to Middle Eastern origin, which usually have to be understood primarily in terms of a search for a prestigious past.⁶ They constitute localized versions of the Hamitic hypothesis that had been prominent in Europe since the nineteenth century, assuming an external and imported origin for many “higher” aspects of African culture (E. Sanders 1969; Zachernuk 1994; Rottland 1996).

The search for a common origin of the Igbo may indeed be futile, given the extent and diversity of the people involved. A frequently accepted theory views the Nsukka-Okigwe highlands and the adjoining Awka-Orlu uplands as “the Igbo cultural heartland.” “The Orlu segment of it is often referred to as Isu, while those who moved out of it in further search of living space are referred to as Isu-Ama” (Afigbo 1992d: 41). When we look at the details, however, the model of a single process of Igbo migration and expansion becomes ever more unlikely. Unlike those of other segmentary societies such as the Tiv and Ibibio, the oral traditions of most Igbo communities usually do not refer to a single founder of a wider “clan” constituting the starting point of past migrations for a larger group of communities, if not the entire group, the most notable exception to this being the Ngwa, who keep a common legend of origin and migration. In an attempt to establish a more comprehensive ethno-regional account of migrations, Igbo historian John Nwachimereze Orijì (1990) collected and analyzed a large number of such stories. The variety and heterogeneity of his sources make comparison difficult, and an overall regional story hardly emerges. Still, some patterns become clear.

Many communities throughout Igboiland claim to have originated locally. This is especially common in the Isuama area, which may even comprise two unrelated centers, Nri-Awka and the Amaigbo/Orlu “Isuama” (Orijì 1990: 16–17, 83). Traditions noting a local origin may indeed indicate that the population concerned has been resident there since a long time, and that further migration processes started from these cores. However, they may also be explained by a loss of historical memory—or simply by the interest of the narrators in allaying any doubt as to an autochthonous status and, therefore, to original ownership of the land.⁷

Other Igbo communities explicitly describe themselves as confederations or amalgamations of smaller units, some of them autochthonous, others with migration histories from diverse origins. Examples of this are Nike (see chapter 12) and Umuchu (Aguata, Anambra),⁸ and this may indeed refer to more recent processes of migration or occupation.

There are numerous communities with more or less elaborate traditions of migration. Some of them are located in Igboland's border areas. Communities in northern Igboland have migratory connections to the Igala and Idoma areas; traditions from west of the Niger mention links to Benin and to areas further north along the river. Other communities—and these seem to form a majority—have stories of migration extending over much shorter distances. While there are numerous differences in details (and even stories that appear completely unrelated to those told in neighboring communities), migration stories of communities within a given area frequently point in similar directions. Thereby it becomes possible to identify broader lines and trends of migration and expansion processes—at least insofar as a “factual” historical interpretation of Igbo oral traditions appears admissible at all.

On the basis of such assumptions, Oriji (1990) proposed a three-layer model of Igbo migrations: The first phase was marked by the existence of two core areas of Igbo settlement around Nri-Awka and Isuama; in a later period, the Oratta-Owerri and Okigwe areas, the Udi-Okigwe escarpment, and the Agbor area west of the Niger were settled by migrations from the early cores; and in a third wave, migration processes reached southern, eastern and northeast Igboland.⁹ But it is clear that, in addition to this three-layer model, there were also processes of migration from outside (especially from Benin and Igala) that had profound effects on cultural patterns in the various Igbo areas, and numerous movements on a smaller scale along other ethnic frontiers as well. Taking into account the diverse layers and directions of migration processes, as well as the numerous exceptions and contradictions in detail, no straightforward model of Igbo expansion can be upheld. A more appropriate model will have to take into account the fact that, besides and “within” the major layers of Igbo migration identified by Oriji, there was a dynamic which Igor Kopytoff (1987) has called “the African frontier”: processes of fission, fueled by intragroup conflict and the search by younger leaders for autonomy, producing groups of migrants who settled hitherto unpopulated spaces in the interstices between existing communities.

Another major puzzle for historians of Igbo society has been the question of why Igbo society, in contrast to its main competitors in today's ethnicized politics in Nigeria, did not develop large-scale precolonial state structures. A. E. Afigbo (1972: 8–14) dismissed the ecological argument—difficulties of communication and little agricultural surplus in forest areas—as conditions in southeastern Nigeria do not decisively differ from those in the southwest with its numerous Yoruba city-states. Afigbo also rejected the argument that the slave trade was responsible for precolonial Igbo statelessness, because the very same trade actually supported the establishment of states in other areas of West Africa, such as

Dahomey and Asante. In conclusion, Afigbo proposed to view precolonial Igbo statelessness from a culturalist perspective, as an expression of “the ethos and genius of the people” (ibid.: 14) that should be viewed not as an indication of “primitivism” but rather as a cultural asset.

However, other historians tended to understand precolonial statelessness in terms of deficiency. This is hardly surprising, given the orientation of much of the older historiography of Africa (especially in Nigeria), as a university discipline emerging since the 1950s, toward the study of precolonial statehood in Africa (see Kaese 1999)—statehood that would compare well with other parts of the world. More recent attempts to identify a prestigious and, in a sense, more “state-like” Igbo past (see chapter 2) have to be seen in this context. Overall, few Igbo historians have viewed precolonial Igbo society in the light of its potential to represent a history of decentralized communities with limited social stratification, self-regulating capabilities, and political traditions that, in some respects, could even qualify as “democratic.”

The Ethnographic Evidence: “Tribes” and “Sub-cultural Areas”

The question “Who are the Igbo?” has puzzled students of Igbo society, looking for and working toward an Igbo ethnic identity, throughout the twentieth century (Bersselaar 1998). Defining the content and boundaries of “Igbo-ness” is exceedingly difficult—due not only to the lack of common myths of origin and of centralized precolonial political institutions but even more to the manifest diversity and considerable local peculiarity, as regards sociopolitical organization and cultural institutions, among communities throughout Igboiland. This diversity, resulting from the sheer size of the population group and its long history of contact and exchange with neighboring groups, makes attempts to define Igbo-ness necessarily imprecise: Many generalizing statements about Igbo society can be made, in an approximate manner, only as statements about “common” or “typical” features, without much claim to representativity in a stricter sense. Nearly always some cases can be found which modify or even contradict general statements. At the same time, the ethnic borderline remains difficult to define as well, as some neighboring groups have some of the features identified characterizing Igbo society. In many ways, “the Igbo” constitute a continuum of sociocultural features with a rather limited “core” and imprecise borderlines.

One common way of addressing Igboiland’s considerable degree of internal diversity has been the definition of “sub-cultural areas.” The first comprehensive attempt at this was P. Amaury Talbot’s *The Peoples of Southern Nigeria* (1926), a work of four volumes, based on the first Nigerian census in 1921 and even more on Talbot’s own encyclopedic knowledge derived from years of work as an administrative officer. The book conveys a good idea of Igboiland’s sociocultural

diversity and provides numerous (though often unrelated and anecdotal) examples, summarizing them in extensive tables on a variety of topics from “birth” to “political organization.” Having a good knowledge of southeastern Nigeria, Talbot avoided overarching generalizations, and his work is a good example of the “approximative” approach toward a definition of Igbo-ness. He defined the “tribe” as

a group speaking the same language, with approximately the same customs, religion and state of civilization, and often claiming a common descent. Some of the Southern Nigerian tribes are so large—over a million strong—that they might almost be considered as nations. On the whole, however, kinship, rather than territorial relations, forms the essential element in the concept of the tribe. (Talbot 1926, vol. 4: 17)

Talbot did not clearly define “sub-tribes” and “clans”—both these categories simply served as subdivisions of larger “tribes,” constructed from what Talbot may have believed to constitute some emic concept of togetherness. Out of 3.93 million people classified as Igbo by the 1921 census, Talbot identified thirty “sub-tribes,” some of them divided into up to seven “clans” (Talbot 1926, vol. 4: 39–40). The largest “sub-tribes” in his classification were the Abadja (comprising 16.3% of all Igbo), Onitsha-Awka (15.5%) and Ngwa (8.8%). Of these three “sub-tribes,” only the last mentioned would be regarded today as having a consciousness of constituting a particular group.

In 1950, the anthropologists Daryll Forde and G. I. Jones drew up a different map of Igboland for the *Ethnographic Survey of Africa* undertaken by the International African Institute in London. They regarded the Igbo as “a people” with “a number of related dialects occupy[ing] a continuous tract of territory and hav[ing] many features of social structure and culture in common.” Forde and Jones created subcategories “for purposes of classification”: “tribes,” “sub-tribes,” “groups,” and “village groups” (1950: 9). However, they did not explicitly define these subcategories, which, indeed, appear to be of limited consistency. Their survey listed about 232 subdivisions by name, each of them comprising a number of “local communities”—usually only a handful, but several dozen in some cases. It remains unclear why an individual subdivision was regarded as a “(sub-)tribe” while another one constituted a “village (group).” In a few cases, Forde and Jones even offered several options. While the subdivisions listed in the survey clearly reflect emic views of community identity, numerous difficulties and inconsistencies arise when comparing individual examples of Forde and Jones’s classification with their present-day counterparts.¹⁰ A much less confusing picture emerges from their classification of five sub-cultural areas. Forde and Jones subdivided the population of Igboland into Northern (38.7% of all Igbo), Southern (or Owerri, 35.1%), Western (11.4%), Eastern (or Cross River, 4.3%), and North-Eastern Igbo (10.6%). Later on in their work, Forde and Jones supplemented this straightforward geographical classification with the sociopolitical and cultural features they regarded as distinctive for each area. While several alternative models to define

sub-cultural areas within Igboland have been proposed since Forde and Jones's work,¹¹ the classification by Forde and Jones is still widely used.

Beyond classification, a range of social anthropological studies have tried to identify and summarize basic features common to Igbo communities in general. They emerged between the late 1930s and the early 1970s, largely within the structural-functionalist paradigm of social anthropology (for a more comprehensive overview, see Jones 1974) that strongly focused on kinship as a fundamental principle of social organization, shaping the image of the Igbo as a segmentary and "stateless" society. They often took off from the question of how political organization, law, and authority could function in a society without formalized political office and institutions of enforcement. The earlier representatives of the structural-functionalist tradition worked in administrative functions or advisory roles for the colonial government, notably government anthropologist C. K. Meek (1937), the linguist Margaret Green (1947), working as a government consultant after the crisis of the "Women's War" of 1929, and Daryll Forde and G. I. Jones (1950). Still, unlike earlier ethnographic writers such as G. T. Basden and P. A. Talbot, they retained close connections to university-based social anthropology. Later authors, especially Edwin Ardener (1954, 1959) and Simon Ottenberg (1968, 1971a) emerged from a more "purely" academic background. A notable author in this tradition is Victor Uchendu (1965), apparently the first Igbo academic anthropologist writing about Igbo society. Trained in the United States and supervised by Paul Bohannan, he was profoundly influenced by the structural-functionalist school of thought. Uchendu's book, *The Igbo of Southeastern Nigeria*, has been reprinted many times and still constitutes a core text on Igbo society. Its thematic extent and the nontechnical language employed make it especially accessible to a nonspecialist readership as well.¹² Unlike the work of earlier authors who focused on the kinship-based "traditional" Igbo society, Uchendu's study—which treats issues such as kinship, socialization, and belief systems alongside contemporary topics such as wage labor and development—reflected the modernizing aspirations and perceptions of the educated Igbo elite in the era of decolonization. The peculiar position of Uchendu and his work as an "auto-ethnography" within the anthropological mainstream of his time makes it attractive to use *The Igbo of Southern Nigeria* as a starting point for a summary of emic Igbo concepts of community.

Individual, Lineage, Gender, and the Limits of Belonging

In virtually any anthropological study, the patrilineage (*umunna*)—the exogamous minimal lineage—features as the fundamental unit of Igbo society. Every individual is clearly located within a single *umunna*; it defines his or her place in society, lines of inheritance, land rights, and so on. "The whole society can be

mapped into a number of agnatic groups,” wrote Uchendu (1965: 64), and, quoting a proverb, “the *umunna* is the source of one’s strength.” From the perspective of the individual, the *umunna* defines a lifelong attachment to an extended family. It also constitutes the core of an individual’s belonging to a specific community—the source of his or her status as its indigene.

Uchendu described the principal systematic (and, at the same time, spatial and symbolical) relationships within the Igbo village as follows:

A typical Igbo village-group consists of a number of semiautonomous villages, each of which is segmented into *umunna* groups (patrilineages). . . . At the head of the *umunna* group is *opara*, the oldest ranking male who holds the lineage *ofo*. *Umunna* as a territorial unit is physically divided into a number of *ezi*—large dwelling units, each having a common, roomy lounge called *ovu*. . . . Within each *ezi* are clustered huts and/or modern bungalows (reflecting the economic status of their owners) belonging to members of different domestic groups. . . . In effect, the *ezi* can be conceptualized as a number of domestic units physically united by a common *ovu* and jurally controlled by a compound head who intervenes in their internal conflicts and handles their external affairs. Symbolically, one *ovu* is equivalent to one compound, which in turn is a small segment of an *umunna* group, the effective social organizational structure of an Igbo village. (1965: 85)

With the growth of a wealthy elite since the 1970s, the compound model of residence centered around the *ovu* (even more commonly called the *obu* or *obi*) has frequently been supplemented by single large houses (*ulo*) built with separate walls and gates.

From the individual’s perspective, the patrilineage constitutes the single most important social institution in life, but other kinship bonds are relevant as well. In the Cross River Igbo communities, there are systems of “double descent” where matrilineal principles play an important role in the definition of an individual’s social belonging (Ottenberg 1968; Nsugbe 1974). Even in the majority of Igbo communities where the matrilineal principle is not so pronounced, the individual keeps a special relationship to his or her mother’s patrilineage (as well as to more “remote” kinsmen) which may become important in cases of severe conflict within his or her own group (Uchendu 1965: 66–67).

Definition of belonging by kinship is a gendered phenomenon. The female members of a patrilineage form the *umuada* (also *umuoḱpu*, “patrilineage daughters”), constituted as a separate group with its own meetings, rights, and powers, especially with regard to the realm of “public morality.” As the patrilineage constitutes an exogamous group and residency after marriage is usually patrilocal, most women live at their husband’s place and establish an intensive relationship to his patrilineage and to the wider community to which it belongs. There, a married woman becomes a member of the “wives of the lineage” (*nyindom* or *inyomdi*; see Agbasiere 2000: 40), which, while constituted and recognized as a group, possesses a less influential status than the *umuada*.¹³ On the other hand, the fact of belonging to two different lineages may allow married women a certain room to maneuver by

operating within two kinship environments, especially given today's increased opportunities of communication, and in the urban environment. The ambivalent position of women between their own and their husbands' lineages is reflected in often humiliating widowhood practices (Korieh 1996) and in ongoing debates about the proper place for a woman's burial (Anigbo 1991).

The limits of belonging to the local community, as defined by kinship relationships, are most obvious for the two categories of slaves in precolonial Igbo society, the *ohu* and *osu*.

Slavery was common in precolonial Igbo society. Purchased slaves (*ohu*) not sold further on to the Atlantic trade system by definition entered the local society without kinship links. Usually, however, such slaves seem to have been incorporated into the kinship system rather fast, nominally becoming junior members of their owners' families and lineages. The terminology of kinship was applied to them and their children, and in this sense they actually became members of a local lineage and thus received a defined status of belonging, including access to land. The living conditions of slaves in precolonial Igbo society were probably rather diverse, but research on this topic has progressed little beyond the generalized accounts of Jack Harris (1942) and Victor Uchendu (1977). It is clear that, even though avenues to wealth were open to slaves, redemption from slave status was far from automatic. Children of slaves remained slaves; and slaves could be subject to various forms of discrimination, such as the prohibition of intermarriage with "free" members of society, or the restriction of access to political offices or certain rituals. A slave could even fall victim to an act of human sacrifice at his master's burial. In the local sphere, knowledge about a person's or family's slave origin survived the formal abolition of slavery during the early colonial period. The awareness of a person being "free-born" or "slave-born" is still important in many places, and the stigmatization and discrimination resulting from this awareness continue to create social and political tension, especially in some northern Igbo communities such as Nike (see chapter 12).

The category *osu*—it exists only in parts of Igboland—is often translated as "cult slave," but the *osu* may be more adequately described as a caste fundamentally separated from the local society, being regarded not only as non-kin but as outside the sphere of the human kinship system as a whole. The *osu* status apparently emerged during the heyday of the transatlantic slave trade, but fundamentally differed from the status of the purchased slave (*ohu*). An *osu* was regarded as person who had been "dedicated" to, or had taken refuge with, a deity and thus became the deity's "slave." An *osu* could neither be sold nor physically harmed, but lived as a despised outcast in the proximity of the deity's shrine, being the object of numerous taboos. Intermarriage with non-*osu* was prohibited. Sexual relations between free men and *osu* women, however, seem to have been common; but the children from such relationships usually retained the *osu* status.¹⁴ Much more pointedly than the *ohu* slave purchased and owned by an individual, the *osu* stood entirely outside of the kinship system of a village, and had virtually no means to get rid of the *osu* status. Entire *osu* families and lineages developed over time. The

osu status was never recognized (and prohibited) as a form of slavery by the colonial government, but, in 1956, the Eastern Region's parliament passed a law that declared it a criminal offense even to call a person an *osu*. Christian churches have persistently acted against the practice. However, stigmatization has persisted until the present day, making it difficult for *osu* to aspire to political office in their home communities, even though (at least according to a common stereotype) "many" of them have become wealthy. Even in the regional and national political arena, public reference to such a status is carefully avoided. While sexual relationships and even permanent partnerships between *osu* and non-*osu* are not unknown in the urban environment today, formal intermarriage remains extremely rare. The risk of unknowingly marrying an *osu* constitutes a source of persistent anxiety to parents who, as a rule, make extensive inquiries into the background of the envisaged partner before a marriage is formally contracted.¹⁵

In a society based largely on the principle of patrilineal descent, free men stand at the top of a "hierarchy of belonging" to the local community: at least in principle, they have access to all the rights offered by the lineage and the larger community. As daughters of a patrilineage, women retain rights within it even if they are married. They do not usually acquire such full rights within the patrilineage into which they marry. In precolonial days, slaves (*ohu*) found themselves at the lower end of the same communal "hierarchy of belonging"; they were even at the risk of being driven out and sold. Over time, slaves not integrated as individuals into free families formed separate lineages and, sometimes, separate villages. Even after the colonial abolition of slavery, many slave descendants still face stigmatization; but while their status within the community may be low, their belonging to it is not disputed. However, the same is not valid for *osu* "outcasts." Even when forming their own kinship order, they continue to stand at the outer limits of the community and are hardly regarded as belonging to it.

A Segmentary Society: The "Town," its Constituent Units, and "Seniority"

The term "patrilineage" and other terms describing basic units of social organization in Igbo society have been applied with a sometimes confusing variety of meanings. Igbo terms for particular units differ according to locality. Identical terms may be applied to different units in different communities (Ardener 1959: 117–19), and the same is true for the English terminology used in different studies of Igbo society. Attempts at standardization for administrative convenience during the colonial period failed to find general acceptance, even among anthropologists (Jones 1949a: 151–52).

Igbo society is segmentary, consisting of various hierarchical levels of social organization that become relevant in different circumstances and can be grouped according to function. Classification attempts beyond the level of the *compound*

(*ezi*, *ama*)—a clearly identifiable residential unit—can be difficult. Several compounds linked by relatively close kinship relationships form a *village subsection*—Uchendu's *umunna* or “patrilineage,” sometimes called a “quarter” or “ward,” or a “kindred” by Margaret Green (1947), comprising up to a few hundred people and forming the “primary” and “vital” group “for the ordinary affairs of everyday life” (Jones 1949a: 151). Several kindreds form a *village* (*mba*, according to John Nwachimereze Oriji 1991: 32; *ama* or *obodo* according to Michael Echeruo 1998: 269) with up to a few thousand inhabitants. Several villages form a *village group* (*obodo*) or “town” in Igbo usage of English. G. I. Jones has called the village group or “town,” often comprising several thousand or even up to ten thousand people today, “the highest coherent unit of I[g]bo social and territorial organization” (1949b: 309).

The village group or “town” fulfilled numerous functions in precolonial Igbo society. Control over land and its defense against intrusion by outsiders was (and, in principle, still is) vested either in the village or in the village group. Few precolonial village groups had a central political authority in the form of kingship. But various institutions of direct and indirect representation (Uchendu 1965: 44–45; see below) and numerous other ties existed among the constituent units: the mutual visit to markets within a “ring” of markets taking place on different days of the four- or eight-day Igbo week; a genealogy serving as a charter of common origin; the reference to a common deity's shrine; the celebration of common festivals; and the observance of certain taboos. In precolonial days, the village group usually formed the highest relevant level of political organization, and it did so only for purposes that were relevant beyond the local constituent levels. In post-Civil War Igboland, this principle has reappeared in the form of administratively created “autonomous communities” (see chapters 6 and 8), though their boundaries are quite different from those of late nineteenth-century village groups.

The principle of segmentary social organization does not necessarily terminate at the village group level, but it rarely had relevance and functionality beyond it in precolonial Igbo society. To designate a cluster of village groups, the term “clan” has most commonly been employed. In some cases (e.g., Umunri Clan or Ngwa) reference is made to a common, named ancestor; but in other cases, no known common ancestry of a particular clan is claimed to exist (as in Nkanu). As an emic concept, the term “clan” is very shadowy in Igboland, or a marker created only during the colonial period when clans were created on various levels, due to administrative requirements or the local political needs and interests of the time. Even larger units beyond the “clan” level were either purely academic constructs (such as the “tribe” or “sub-tribe”) or emerged only in the context of the colonial and postcolonial construction of Igbo ethnicity (see chapter 5) and do not appear to correspond to any functional sociopolitical units of precolonial Igbo society.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, legends of origin play a fundamental role in the self-definition of Igbo villages and village groups. Except for those which explicitly acknowledge having emerged as a “confederation” of groups of diverse