

A Historical Analysis of the Impact of the Imo River in Owerinta from the Colonial Period.

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Abstract

The Imo River has played a significant role in the socio-economic and political development of Owerinta from the colonial period to the present day. Owerinta is a town located in Isialangwa South Local Government of Abia State, Southeastern Nigeria. The Imo River at Owerinta is located within longitude 7°17' E and Latitude 5°18' N. The river served as a source of water for domestic use, fisheries, recreational activities, and agricultural irrigation programs for people settling close to the water body, and also as a source of sand for sand excavators. This study provides a historical analysis of the river's impact on the region, examining how it influenced colonial trade, agricultural practices, and the transportation network in the area. The study, which adopted the qualitative research methodology and used the historical approach of investigation, observed that the Imo River served as a vital waterway, facilitating the movement of goods and people, which in turn contributed to the growth of Owerinta as a commercial hub. The study also observed that the river supported agriculture, which was crucial to the colonial economy. Additionally, the study explored the environmental and socio-cultural effects of the river on the local communities, including its role in shaping local customs and beliefs. This analysis draws on oral histories and existing literature to provide a comprehensive understanding of the Imo River's enduring significance in Owerinta. The study concludes that the exploitation of the river's resources, combined with inadequate environmental management, has resulted in significant ecological degradation. The analysis highlights the need for sustainable management practices to restore and protect the Imo River.

Keywords: *Community, Policing, Fulani herders, Farmers, Community Policing, Pastoral Terrorism.*

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Introduction

The Imo River, located in southeastern Nigeria, flows 240 kilometres into the Atlantic Ocean.¹ It has been a significant geographical feature for the communities along its banks, including Owerrinta. From precolonial times, the river had played a crucial role in the development of the region. The Imo River originates from the Okigwe-Awgu Uplands and flows southwards through several towns, including Owerrinta, before reaching the Atlantic Ocean. The river has several tributaries, including the Otamiri and Aba Rivers, which contribute to its flow and navigability. The river basin is characterised by a mix of lowland and upland areas, with fertile alluvial plains that supported agriculture, particularly palm oil production, during the colonial period.

Historically, the river has a prominent place in the evolution of the Ngwa people, as the Ngwa mythology states that the Ngwa people were quick to cross the Imo River before the river rose to create a significant boundary separating two brothers who were migrating from Umunneoha. However, the Owerrinta axis of the Imo River divides the Ngwa people of Owerrinta from their Ngo Okpala neighbours in Imo state. The Imo River in Owerrinta features a bridge that connects Imo state to Abia state. Consequently, the river serves as a significant boundary between Okpala town in Imo state and Owerrinta town in Abia state. However, apart from the waterway, an overhead bridge was constructed to link the communities and facilitate vehicular movement.

Geographical Overview of Owerrinta

Owerrinta is a small community situated in Isialangwa South local government area, Abia State. This territory is located in the southeastern part of Nigeria. Geographically, Owerrinta is located on the banks of the Imo River, which flows through the region and has historically influenced both the physical and socio-economic landscapes of the area. The town is part of the larger Ngwa ethnic group, and its location is significant due to its proximity to the commercial cities of Aba and Umuahia, as well as its position on the major Owerri-Aba highway, which links it to other parts of southeastern Nigeria.² The town was a central economic hub of the area because of the Imo River. Companies like the UAC were established in Owerrinta until the railway, which linked Aba to other major towns, was built, and the company, with some of its subsidiaries, moved to Aba town.³

The topography of Owerrinta is predominantly flat with gently undulating landforms, typical of the Niger Delta and southeastern Nigerian regions. The soil in this area is primarily loamy and clayey, which has contributed to its agricultural productivity, especially in the cultivation of cassava, yams, and vegetables. The town's location within the humid tropical climate zone means that it experiences two distinct seasons: a wet season, which typically spans from March to October, and a dry season from November to February. Annual rainfall is substantial, ranging between 2,000 and 3,000 mm, contributing to the lush vegetation and dense forests that characterize the region.⁴

The strategic location of Owerinta along major trade routes has contributed to its economic importance. Although primarily rural, the town's connectivity to larger urban centres like Aba and Umuahia has facilitated the movement of goods and people, fostering a vibrant local economy based on agriculture and small-scale trade.⁵ The Imo River has historically been a crucial artery for transportation, particularly during the colonial period when it was used to move goods such as palm oil and other agricultural products to coastal cities for export.

Demographically, Owerinta is predominantly inhabited by people of the Ngwa ethnic group, a sub-group of the larger Igbo ethnic group. The population has grown steadily due to its economic activities and its accessibility, attracting migrants from nearby areas. This has led to a blending of cultures, although the Ngwa people have maintained their traditional agricultural practices and communal ways of life.

Rivers in Colonial Igbo land: an Overview

The rivers of Igbo land, particularly the Imo River and its tributaries, played a pivotal role during the colonial period, shaping both the socio-economic and political landscape of the region. Prior to colonisation, the Igbo people had established complex trade networks facilitated by their proximity to these water bodies. The rivers served as natural highways, linking different Igbo communities and enabling trade in goods such as palm oil, yams, and other agricultural products. When the British colonial administration began to assert control over Igbo land in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, they quickly recognised the strategic importance of these rivers for both trade and governance.

The colonial government utilized the Imo River as a conduit for economic exploitation, transporting raw materials from the hinterland to coastal ports for export to Europe. The Niger river ports of Onitsha and Aboh became critical hubs in the palm oil trade, which was central to the British economy during this period.⁶ Rivers also played a crucial role in the establishment of colonial administrative structures. The British often stationed their administrative outposts near rivers to facilitate ease of movement, communication, and the shipment of goods. Additionally, missionaries who arrived in the region during the colonial era used these rivers to penetrate the interior, spreading Christianity and Western education, thereby influencing the socio-cultural transformation of Igbo society.⁷

Beyond their economic and administrative significance, rivers in Igbo land were also culturally important. Igbo cosmology and religious practices are often centred around water deities, and communities hold certain rivers as sacred. The imposition of colonial rule disrupted many of these indigenous practices, as the British sought to replace local beliefs with Christianity and Western norms. However, rivers continued to serve as a site of cultural resistance and identity for many Igbo people throughout the colonial period.⁸

In the colonial era, the British colonial administration recognized the strategic importance of the Imo River for transportation and trade. In 1907-1908 and 1911, the river was cleared to facilitate navigation and trade, first to Aba and then to Udo near Umuahia.⁹

With the clearing of Imo and Otanmiri rivers in 1909, and rendering them safe for navigation, traders from Bonny, Opobo, Ohambele and New Calabar were able to establish trading posts at Owerinta, Owerri, Iheagwa and Aba.¹⁰ Invariably, the river enabled the transportation of palm oil and other agricultural products, which were major exports during the colonial period. Owerinta, along with other towns like Ohambele and Akwete, became significant palm produce markets due to their proximity to the river.¹¹ Rivers in Igbo land were not just geographical features but central actors in the region's colonial history. They facilitated economic exploitation, aided the spread of colonial governance and religion, and remained a cultural touchstone for the indigenous population despite the disruptions caused by colonization. The intersection of rivers and colonialism in Igbo land exemplifies how natural features can become deeply intertwined with the political and economic agendas of imperial powers.

Impact of Imo River

The Imo River has significantly impacted its surrounding communities economically, socially and environmentally. The water body influenced the economy of Owerinta by serving as a vital resource for agriculture, transportation, and fishing, all of which form the economic backbone of the community. The river's fertile floodplains provide rich alluvial soil that supports extensive agricultural activities, particularly the cultivation of crops like cassava, yams, and vegetables, which are staple foods in the region. This agricultural productivity has not only sustained local livelihoods but also contributed to trade within and beyond the community, especially with neighbouring towns and markets.¹² The Owerinta people and their adjacent neighbouring village, known as the Umuocheala village, practice sand excavation as their primary occupation. Due to the lucrative nature of the venture, they have improved the manual excavation method by acquiring machines that now facilitate the easy extraction of white sand and gravel from the Imo River.

Additionally, the Imo River played a critical role in irrigation, particularly during the dry season, ensuring year-round farming, which boosts both food security and income generation for farmers. People from neighbouring towns come to the riverbank during the dry season to plant. The crops usually grown around this time are maize, legumes and vegetables. The choice of crops was usually based on the fact that the crops should have matured and produced enough for the farmer before the next rainy season, which may eventually lead to the expansion of water. The expansion of the river to its borders sometimes buries the crops planted on the banks.

Historically, the river also functioned as a transportation route, particularly during the colonial period, when it facilitated the movement of goods such as palm oil, a significant economic product, to coastal areas for export. This established Owerinta as part of a broader economic network linked to the colonial economy, with the river acting as a conduit for trade and resource extraction.¹³ Furthermore, the river supports a vibrant local fishing industry, providing not only food for the community but also a source of income for many households, as surplus fish are sold in local markets. The river's role in both transportation and fisheries has helped diversify the local economy, reducing dependence on agriculture alone.¹⁴ Economically, the Imo River facilitated trade and commerce within the Owerinta axis, and agricultural developments were also felt as a result of the river, which had a remarkable influence on local industries.

There is a mythology that the Imo River shifted its location; thus, the present location in Owerinta is not its original site. This belief therefore portrays that the Ngwa people were gifted more expanse of dry land as a result of the movement of the Imo River.¹⁵ This account underscores the social impact of the Imo River. The location of the Imo River also encourages change in population dynamics, cultural exchange, and impact on the local communities and lifestyles.

Environmental Impact of Imo River

The Imo River has significantly impacted the local ecosystems, flora, and fauna. The Imo River supports a variety of plant species in its floodplains and wetlands. These plants provide critical ecosystem services such as erosion control, water filtration, and habitat for wildlife. Riparian vegetation, in particular, stabilizes riverbanks and offers shelter and food to many species. However, increasing pollution from agricultural runoff, industrial effluents, and domestic waste has severely degraded water quality. Nutrient loading from fertilizers promotes eutrophication, leading to the proliferation of invasive aquatic plants like *Eichhornia crassipes* (water hyacinth), which suffocates native plants and disrupts aquatic ecosystems. As a result, the biodiversity of endemic plant species has been reduced, and the overall structure of riparian forests has been compromised.¹⁶

For the fauna, particularly aquatic organisms such as fish, shellfish and amphibians, the Imo River serves as a critical habitat. However, overfishing, pollution, and habitat destruction have led to a decline in populations of native fish species, including catfish (*Clarias gariepinus*) and tilapia (*Oreochromis niloticus*). Studies have shown that pollution, especially from heavy metals and industrial discharge, has resulted in bioaccumulation in aquatic organisms, posing risks to both the ecosystem and human health.¹⁷ Amphibians like frogs and reptiles like water snakes, which are sensitive to changes in water quality, have also been adversely affected, with many species experiencing population declines.

Bird species that depend on the river's wetlands and riparian zones for nesting and feeding are also impacted. The reduction in fish and insect

populations, due to pollution and habitat loss, affects the food availability for these birds, leading to a decrease in bird diversity. Species such as the African Fish Eagle (*Haliaeetus vocifer*) and various heron species that are common to river ecosystems may be under threat as their primary food sources decline.

The Imo River, especially in the Owerrinta region, plays a vital role in sustaining local ecosystems, but its health is under severe threat from a range of human activities. Pollution from industries like the paper mills in Owerrinta, habitat destruction, invasive species, and overexploitation of the river — primarily through sand excavation and dry season farming on the riverbanks— have caused a decline in both flora and fauna, leading to long-term environmental consequences. Farmers on the riverbank use chemicals like pesticides and NPK fertilisers, which are deposited into the water as soon as the rainy season begins and the water level rises to cover the dry season farms. Biodiversity loss, water quality degradation, and altered hydrology are some of the pressing issues that need immediate community and government attention.

Social and religious impact

The river has traditionally been viewed as a source of life, sustenance, and spiritual significance, influencing various aspects of both social and religious practices. For the people of Owerrinta, water bodies like the Imo River are not only vital for their physical survival but also serve as sacred entities, deeply integrated into their cosmology and religious rituals. These water deities are believed to influence aspects of fertility, agriculture, and health. They are often invoked during religious ceremonies, such as annual festivals that seek blessings for bountiful harvests or protection from disasters.¹⁸ Ritualistic offerings and sacrifices are made to the river as part of these religious observances, with priests or custodians acting as intermediaries between the spiritual and physical worlds. The communal use of the river for fishing, farming, and domestic purposes further solidifies its role in shaping the local social identity.¹⁹

The advent of Christianity in the region introduced new religious dynamics, often challenging traditional beliefs centred around the Imo River. Christian missionaries, in their efforts to convert the indigenous population, frequently condemned the veneration of water spirits as pagan. However, rather than erasing these indigenous practices, a syncretic blend of Christianity and traditional religion emerged. For instance, many local Christians continue to observe traditional river-based rituals, such as libations and offerings, while also participating in Christian worship. This syncretism is evident during religious festivals where both Christian and traditional elements coexist, indicating the enduring socioreligious significance of the river even in the face of religious change.²⁰

In recent times, the Imo River has played a significant role, especially in Christian activities. The people of Owerrinta often incorporate natural bodies of water for various symbolic and ritualistic purposes, and the Imo

River has been a focal point for several such activities, including baptisms, prayer meetings, and spiritual retreats.

Conclusion

The Imo River has played a multifaceted and evolving role in shaping the history and development of Owerinta from the colonial period to the present. During the colonial era, the river served as a critical transportation route and economic artery, facilitating trade, agriculture, and the movement of goods and people. Its strategic importance was not only recognised by the local population but also by colonial administrators, who utilised the river to extract resources and expand colonial influence in southeastern Nigeria. As a natural boundary and source of life, the Imo River also profoundly influenced the cultural and social dynamics of Owerinta communities. It was central to traditional practices, livelihoods, and indigenous governance structures, helping to sustain agriculture and fishing, which were essential for the survival of local communities. The colonial disruption of these systems, through land acquisitions and infrastructural changes, transformed the river's role from a purely indigenous resource to one embedded in the machinery of colonial exploitation.

However, the river's significance extended beyond the economic and political domains; it also held social, cultural, and spiritual importance. The river became intertwined with the religious practices of both indigenous faiths and, later, Christianity, especially as missionary activities increased in the region. With time, the Imo River emerged as a site for Christian baptisms, spiritual rituals, and communal gatherings, reflecting its enduring role in the social fabric of Owerinta.

Poor waste disposal and urban waste running into the Imo River have led to a degradation of the water quality. To address this, the community can mandate nearby industries and paper mills to discharge their waste into designated collection points, with strict enforcement of compliance. The community can also partner with government agencies to ensure regular dredging and waste removal activities from the river. The Imo River remains a prominent water body in the Owerinta axis, and its legacy from the colonial period continues to influence the region's socio-economic and environmental landscape, highlighting the complex interaction between natural geography and human history.

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