

# A Study of the Cultural Relationship between Igala (Igula) Kingdom of Nigeria and Gullah People of North America

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**Abstract:** The study of the relationship between an ethnic group, Igala Kingdom, and Gullah people of the United States of America has been carried out with a view to tracing the origin of some of the cultural activities of the Gullah people. The results showed that there are some cultural relationships between the Igala kingdom of Nigeria and Gullah people of USA such as in the areas of culture, traditions, occupation, nomenclature and tribal names.

**Keywords:** America, Carolina, Igala, Gullah, Nigeria.

## I. INTRODUCTION

### A. Background of the study

Slavery was central to the development of South Carolina in the United States of America, in the eighteenth century. The enslaved were a majority of the population and labor force for much of the century and made up close to half of the personal wealth recorded in probate inventories in most decades (Peter, et al., 2001). The Gullah people are descendants of various African ethnic groups including Nigerians who were forced together on South Carolina plantations, and have preserved more of their African cultural history than any other large group of blacks in the United States, noted William S. Pollitzer, professor emeritus of anatomy and anthropology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, in a 1999 book (*Tibbetts, 2000*).

The people of African ancestry who are identified as Gullah or Gullah Geechee are found in South Carolina, Florida, North Carolina, Georgia and other places including outside the United States of America like Trinidad and Tobago. Though forcefully taken from their origin and ancestral homes, including the Igala Kingdom of Nigeria, the Gullah people did not forget their cultures and traditions.

“The Gullah Geechee people are the descendants of West and Central Africans who were enslaved and brought to the lower Atlantic states of North Carolina, South Carolina, Florida, and Georgia to work on the coastal rice, sea island cotton and indigo plantations.” (nps.gov)

Till date, some of these cultures are still being practiced by them in America, and some are still in their original or slightly modified forms. Many tribes were affected during the slave trade. The Igala ethnic group is probably the most affected people as they are indigenous across various parts of Nigeria today and comprised most of the communities that were raided by the slave traders in those days which included the fishing, hunting and farming camps along the river Niger where Igala people were staying. In addition, many Igala warriors were captured in Benin in 1516 during the Igala-Benin war by Portuguese mercenaries who fought Igala warriors along with

Benin warriors using their sophisticated war tools which Igala warriors, who were using local weapons, could not withstand.

In view of this, there is a need to assess the cultural relationships existing between the Igala kingdom of Nigeria and Gullah people of the United States of America, and this is the reason for this work.

### B. Indigenous Igala Kingdom of the United States of America

Indigenous Igala people of America are descendants of Igala men and women who were forcefully taken from the Igala Kingdom of Nigeria in those days. Today, most of them have reconnected with their origin, the ancient Igala kingdom of Nigeria headquartered in Idah, Kogi State, Africa. Indigenous Igala people are found in South Carolina, North Carolina, Florida, Georgia and other places across the USA. They are mostly regarded as Gullah-Igala people.

In addition, Igala kingdom, USA, which has her headquarters in Charleston, South Carolina, has been celebrating the Igala festivals such as feasts of the ancestors called *Ibegwu* or *Egwu* in Igala, *Ocho* festival which is the pre-farming festival and hunting festival of Igala people of Nigeria. The supreme head of the Igala kingdom of USA is Chief Edibo Idih Abba Nizar of Charleston. Igala history has been discussed at various events, on radio stations and at the Omala African Redemptive Museum in Charleston.

Other traditional rulers or officials of Igala Kingdom, USA, are Princess Agula Ufedo-Ojo, Lori LJ Johnson and Iye Emah Ahliellah, of South Carolina; Abeneche Unyo Ojochamachala of Florida; Omachi Reggie Singleton and Omachi Alexander Ravenel of North Carolina.



Onu Edibo Idih Abba Nizar (Onu Igala Kingdom USA),  
Omachi Alexander Revenell II (Omachi Saluda, North  
Carolina) and Omachi Reggie Singleton (Omachi, Charlotte,  
North Carolina)



Princess Ufedo-Ojo and Iye (Queen mother) Emah



Abeneche Unyo Ojochamachala of Florida

## II. CULTURAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN IGULA (IGALA) KINGDOM OF NIGERIA AND GULLAH PEOPLE OF NORTH AMERICA

### A. Some cultural relationship between Igala people of Nigeria and Gullah people of America

1. Nomenclature relationship
2. Cultural festivals
3. Traditional relationship
4. Addition of "I" to beginning of words starting with consonants
5. Occupational relationship
6. Tribal names relationship

### B. Analysis

#### a) Nomenclature relationship

One of the factors used for determining related or same people is the name of their tribes. For instance, it can be confirmed from various research evidences that the Galla people of Ethiopia, Igara Kingdom of Uganda, Igala Kingdom of Sri Lanka, WanGara-Azande Kingdom of South Sudan, Galla of Liberia, Attagara of Kenya, etc. originated from the ancient Nile valley area. These people are in various locations, various countries, and also migrated from the Nile area to the present locations at various times and even with different languages now due to migration, intermarriage, colonization, acculturation, etc. but with some similar vocabularies. But despite all these separation, the name of the tribe, the Galla who were said to have ruled Egypt as the tenth dynasty still remain even though it is in variants.

In the case of Igala people of Nigeria, they have been called or identified by various names such as Gara, Igara, Gala, Igala, Igullah. Attagara, Atigala, etc. In the work by H. R. Palmer in 1928, titled "Installation of an Attah of Idah (Nigeria)" he recorded Igala people as Igula and Igara. In his terms, "The language is now known as Igara or Igula – a term which is ...".

In the work by E. C. Ejiogu in 2004 titled "Abstract Title of dissertation: The Roots of political... Drum", he described Igala as Atagara, Igara, Igula).

Talking about the Gullah people of North America, which has a large number of Igala people who were forcefully taken from Igala Kingdom during trans-Sahara trade, some of whom are already reconnected with Attah Igala, the king of Igala kingdom and Idah, the ancestral home of all Igala people, one can say that Gullah identity has a root from Igullah (Igala) of Nigeria. The reason why it was not traced to Igala by past researchers is not farfetched. Igala has been lost in various rerecords of enslaved people since Samuel Ajayi had recorded in his book in 1854 that Igala are Yoruba people. This record he handed down to the white people made them put most of the enslaved Igala people under Yoruba identity. In the case of the enslaved Igala in Cuba, they were identified and recorded under the identity of Igala word, Olukumi, an Igala word which means my friend in English language. In Brazil, our people were identified and recorded under the Igala identity, Nago. Nago is an Igala word used for greeting. It means thank you or sorry. But because they already had the record of Igala being Yoruba, they decided to classify these people including those with pure Igala names like Agbo, Akor, Osayi. Adebo, Abara, etc. as Yoruba even though Nago or Onukumi (Olukumi) are not Yoruba words.

This is the case of the Gullah people of North America. Instead of tracing the origin of the word to Nigeria where many people were taken from, especially as contained in the book by Turner, it was traced to Angola. By comparing the three – Angola, Igula and Gullah nomenclatures, it can be concluded that Igula of Nigeria is the root of Gullah in North America, not Angola.

In addition, there is a river called river Ogeche in Igula (Igala) kingdom of Nigeria. Fishing is done on this river by Igala people. Also, various crops especially rice and cassava are being farmed by Igala people in Idah till date. Vegetables are also planted beside this river. It can be opined that the river our people met in North America after being taken from here looks like the Ogeche river in Igala kingdom of Nigeria, and also being used for the same or related functions there, hence the replication of the name, Ogeche. Ogeche is an Igala word which means stress. This is because the location of the river is difficult to reach because of the topography of the way to it from Idah town.

#### b) Cultural festivals

**i. Feast of the ancestors:** Many African Americans, especially Gullah people of the United States of America celebrate their departed ones or ancestors and it is mostly an annual event. The event is celebrated in June every year and is tagged Juneteenth. Although Juneteenth on June 19, 1865, refers to the day when enslaved African Americans had their emancipation, it is used by the people to remember their past Heroes. It is a holiday which marked the end of slavery in the USA. This Juneteenth ceremony involves procession, visit to the burial locations and waterside, music, dance, and food sacrifice to the deceased family members. Among the Gullah people, the event is used for honoring the ancestors. The remembrance or celebration of the ancestors is one of the core culture of Igala people. In fact, it is one of the royal cultures of Attah Igala and is known as Egwu.

In Igala kingdom, it is called Ibegwu, Egwu, Egwugwu. This culture was brought by Igala people from their origin, which is

the Nile valley (Egypt). In ancient Egypt, it was called the feast of the valley.

Till date, in as much as there are numerous Igala people who are Christians and Muslims today, the feast of the ancestors is being celebrated in various parts of Kogi state as well as over 30 states of Nigeria in which indigenous Igala people are found. For instance, the Egwu festival is celebrated in Edo State, Delta State (Ebu, Illah, Oko, Aiak, Ugboodu, Asaba, ...), Anambra State (Onitsha, Ossamala, Odekpe, etc), Benue state, Nasarawa State, etc.

Today, many Gullah people of South Carolina, North Carolina, Georgia and Florida have been reconnected with their Igala origin in Nigeria. In addition, some of these Gullah-Igala people are part of the Juneteenth celebration or remembrance of their ancestors. Although some people attribute the origin of word- Gullah to Angola, there is no ancestral feast being celebrated in Angola. It can be said that the idea of ancestors' remembrance or feast in the Carolinas might have been brought out by an Igala person or someone from the ethnic group where such festival is being celebrated in the hometown, but it will not be someone from Angola because feast of the ancestors is not celebrated in Angola.

**ii) Moja festival:** In Igala terms, Imoja means coming together or meeting people to become one. Oja means many or a large number of people. When different or many people in the society are being brought together to do things together and work together, it is known as Imoja or amoja in the Igala context. This Moja Festival is also one of the events that is still being celebrated in North America.

**Ujama festival:** Ujama in the Igala context simply means "fight and become friends or become one". It deals with the struggling together of a group of people in a community in order to become one strong people. It is an act of fighting a common enemy.

**Imani (Ima-ene) festival:** This deals with having knowledge, ideas about yourself, people and things. It deals with developing yourself by yourself. It involves producing what you use for yourself and people.

### c) Traditional relationship

There are several traditions of the Igala/Igula Kingdom of Nigeria found among Gullah people of the United States of America. Some of these traditions are:

#### 1. The shooting of guns and smashing of noisy objects at burial:

In Igala kingdom, during burials, especially burial of adults, there will be gunshots at the burial spot. This is to create a way and ward off obstacles from the way for the deceased person to travel to the underworld. In addition, that is also to prevent a death in the clan or family soon.

Among some Gullah people of North America, during burial they would smash bottles and calabash over the place to break the chain so that no one in the family would die soon.

**2. Basket weaving:** Although there are some other ethnic groups in Nigeria or parts of Africa that make baskets, the baskets by Igala people of Nigeria are different due to the nature of their occupations. While some which are round in shape are made for harvest and carrying of certain loads, the type used for carrying yam and cassava are different. The type of basket used by Igala farmers to carry their cassava or yam is rectangular in shape. These special kinds of baskets are found or made by the Gullah people of America. The rectangular one

is called Agba-Okpu. This is one of the shared traditions between Igula and Gullah.

**3. Net making:** Making a net for fishing is a special skill. In fact, it is difficult to learn as it will take time and endurance to learn it perfectly. In Igala or Igula Kingdom of Nigeria, net making is one of the works of the fishermen. It involves the use of some implements such as *Opata Oli* (flat short wood) and *Ikochi* (specially carved wood with a pointed head), and thread. It is that thread that is used for making the net. This skill is found in the Igula Kingdom of Nigeria and the Gullah Nation of America. Till date, net making is still done among the Igala/Igula people and Gullah people.

**4. Boat making:** Boats or canoes are made from a big tree when it falls down and a length of about 9 - 16 meters is cut out. The making of a canoe also involves special skills. Also, canoes do have different designs and form. The type of canoes made by Gullah people are similar to those found among the Igala communities along the river Niger.

**5. Passing a child over a grave:** In Igala Kingdom, children are brought to a masquerade to touch or have medicine tied to their neck when someone dies or when a masquerade (dead ancestor) comes out. This is to prevent the child from always crying in the night which could probably lead to death. The cry is because the baby will be seeing the dead person, hence the cry and by extension sickness. Among the Gullah people of North America, related tradition is found. When someone dies, babies in the environment are crossed over the grave. This is to prevent the dead from appearing to the babies and making them cry.

**6. Eating of white chalk:** White chalk is called Afu in Igala. It is a form of medicine in Igala. It can be dissolved in water, and then drunk and ordinarily it can be eaten too. It can also be rubbed on the body either as a dry solid or when dissolved in water. When rubbed on the body, it helps to reduce the hotness of the body. It "watches" your stomach too. In the Gullah area of the United States of America, white chalk is also eaten for medicinal purposes. It is called "eaten of white dirt".

#### d) Addition of "I" to beginning of words starting with consonants

The Igala/Igula kingdom of Nigeria are fond of adding the letter "i" to the beginning of words starting with consonants. Eg Gala is Igala, Peter is Ipeter, Sunday is Isunday, Motor is Imotor, etc. from research, this is the same case with many Carolinas. Names like Kelvin are called Ikelvin by them. Boats are called Iboat, etc.

#### e) Occupational relationship

**Fishing:** Igala people of Nigeria spread across the banks of rivers Niger and rivers Benue. They are at the bank of the river from Lokoja through Idah through Anambra, even Enugu, Edo, Delta, River state, etc. This is because they are specialized in fishing. They make use of various fishing implements such as throwing nets, setting nets, hooks, baskets, etc. for fishing. Many Gullah people are also involved in fishing. They are also skilled in using various fishing implements for fishing.



Making of basket by a Gullah man Source: matttommy.com



Making of net by a Gullah man. Source: scea.org



Casting net by Gullah fishermen Source: scea.org

**Rice farming:** Igala people, due to their locations around the rivers, are well known for rice farming. Rice is mostly planted where it is close to water or clayey as well as moist areas. Some areas of Igala land like Ibaji, Ossamala, Aika, Oko, Uloshi, Ifeku, Inyele, Allah, etc. are around the bank of river, and these locations or settlements of Igala people are sometimes affected by floods. They also plant yams and vegetables. These are the same occupations of Gullah people of the United States of America. Also, just like Igala people of Nigeria, Gullah people of America eat rice very well along with fresh fish and vegetables. In fact, rice and vegetables with fresh fish is the common food of Igala people in the Ibaji area.

#### f) Tribal names relationship

Although numerous Igala people were forcefully taken from Igala kingdom or communities in Nigeria during the slave trade, Igala people were often classified as other tribes especially Yoruba as a result of the wrong classification of Igala by Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther in 1854 in his book. Having submitted this book to his masters who gave him this work even though the Igala identity had been in existence even in 1515 when Igala had a war with Benin, the recent classification was used on all our people taken from here. Hence even the person bearing Akor, Abara, Adebo, etc or any Igala name will be classified as Yoruba. Below are names of some Igala people brought from Nigeria to America or to the locations of the Gullah people today.

#### Some Names Of The Olden Days Igala People Among Gullah People Of Usa

Aba (m): One who boasts. 2. Abara (M): A male child born when his father or grandfather was no longer alive. 3. Abako (m): A child born in a location far from their home town. 4. Abo (M): One who makes peace. 5. Adajo (M): One who brings people together. 6. Adeno (M): Medicine man. 7. Adebo (m): Servant

8. Adi (F): Beauty. 9. Adiyee (m/f): Supporter or helper of mother. 10. Adodo (M): A child born in a new settlement. 11. Adu (m): Servant

12. Aduwa (M): Prayer. 13. Afa (M): Long live. 14. Afe (F/M): One who searches or, a child born after struggling. 15. Afene (f): same as 14 above. 16. Afo (F): A child born of Afo Igala week day. 17. Agama (M): A strong one. 18. Agbaja (M): Safety, Bag.

19. Agoli (M): One who looks or searches will see. 20. Ahi (M): Deep. 21. Aja (m/f): A child born on market day. 22. Ako (M): One who instructs or writes. 23. Akpe (m): Scorpion, strong one. 24. Aku (m): Elder's resting place, denotes honor. 25. Aladi (F): A girl born on Sunday. 26. Alamu (f): Rest, comfort. 27. Anu (m): Royal. 28. Anwa (m): Decider. 29. Ani (f): Owner. 30. Araba (m): Hospitable person. 31. Akpala (m): Warrior, Hunter, bravery. 32. Anika (f): Voice. 33. Arajuma (f): Running for comfort. 34. Abu (M): Brave one

35. Adaja (m): Peace maker

36. Agali (m): Son of Aga

37. Agbaka (m): Gun, warrior, strong one

38. Ajegbe (m): Hardworking

39. Ajuda (m): A reincarnate

40. Akaja (m): An additional child

41. Akani (m): A child whose survival was probable when a baby.

42. Babata (m): A child born when the father was dead

43. Ene (f): Woman, your person.

44. Ere (m): Choice

45. Eda (M): Strength, struggle

46. Elu (f): Vision

47. Ida (f): Have struggled

48. Idi (m): Strength, power

49. Igu (m): Settlement

50. Igunuko (m): Settled based on rule.

51. Iko (m): Time, period, God's time.

52. Ila (m): Strayed

53. Ilami (m): Walked far to resting place

54. Ilawo (f): Star, light

55. Imi (f/m): Life, breathe.

56. Iya (f): Mother

57. Ijayi (m): Tall

58. Okpoto (m): Igala

59. Aso/Acho (m): We have done, completed  
60. Aya (f): Mother, a child that resembles the grandmother  
61. Aliya (f): A child who left and came back again.

62. Aya (f): A child who resembles the grandmother

63. Aye (m/f): A child begotten after a long wait.

64. Onah (m): A child or son of a skilled man

65. Ochayi/Osayi (m): The son of a hunter, a royal title of Igala kingdom

66. Ochan (m): An Igala version of the name, Sani

(Sources of the original names: Lorenzo Dow Turner, Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect, 1949)

### CONCLUSION

From the analysis so far, it can be concluded that there is a cultural relationship between Igala kingdom of Nigeria and Gullah people of the United State of America, and that, some of the cultures are found to be taken to the area by Igala people among the Gullah people such as Aku, Adebo, Abo, Agbaka, Osayi, Abara, Ako, Okpoto and others whose names in the book by Turner in 1949 though wrongly classified as Yoruba due to the wrong history by Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther in 1850s where he recorded that Igala ethnic was a Yoruba man, thereby making every Igala to be wrongly classified as Yoruba by many authors especially the external ones.

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