



## What Did Emeagwali Discover? —Part 11

In the 11th installment of our weekly series at [emeagwali.com](http://emeagwali.com), we walk down memory lane to March 26, 1974. The scenario: Philip Emeagwali “discovers” that black Americans no longer speak their native African languages.

## The Last Speaker of Igbo Has Died!

Transcribed and edited from a lecture delivered by [Philip Emeagwali](http://emeagwali.com). The unedited [video](#) is posted at [emeagwali.com](http://emeagwali.com).

My first awareness of black America came in 1968 from reading the classic “*Up From Slavery*” by Booker T. Washington. I read as a 13-year-old refugee living in a refugee camp located at Saint Joseph’s Primary School, Awka-Etiti, Biafra. So for a period, I carried the image of Africans in the United States, who could still speak some African languages, two centuries after they were liberated from slavery.

As I remember, the first time I saw a black American image was in 1972 in *Jet* magazine in the remote village of Ibuzor. The second was in 1973 in *Ebony* magazine in new library in Onitsha. The third was in February 1974 in the movie *Shaft* in a cinema in Lagos.

The first time I saw a black American in person was on March 20, 1974. He was a young marine standing guard at the gates of the US embassy on Victoria Island, Lagos, Nigeria. I was there for an appointment for my visa interview. I remember gawking at him because he had an exotic look.

Five days later, I was many black Americans at New York's John F. Kennedy airport and I assumed I will see more in Oregon, which was my final destination. So at 7 am, the day after my arrival in Monmouth, Oregon, Jim, the resident assistant who had volunteered as my guide for the day, knocked on my door at Room 36, Butler Hall. He invited me for breakfast.

In the cafeteria, I was taken aback by the sea of a thousand young white faces. Growing up in Africa, I had never seen a white teenager. But here I was in America, and there was not a single black face in the crowd of young people.



I definitely stood out in Oregon. Here is a photo of me taken for my passport for my travel from Nigeria to the United States. [Philip Emeagwali, in Onitsha, Nigeria, 1973]

It wasn't until my third day in Monmouth that I finally saw a black person. He was about 19 and the first black American I tried to have a conversation with. However, due to his black American accent, I wasn't sure what language he was speaking.

I asked him, "Which tribe do you belong to?" He hesitated, and so I asked, "Which African language do you speak?" "*kedu asusu Africa na asu,*" I thought quietly in ancestral Igbo language.

He could not answer. It was as shocking to me as it would have been if all white South Africans were fluent in Zulu and not one of them could understand a word of English. *etu oga adi na obulu na ndi beke-e nile bi-na obodo South Africa na asu asusu zulu.*

It then dawned on me that black Americans of Igbo descent no longer spoke the Igbo language. That day, March 26, 1974, will forever remain fresh in my memory because it was the day I tried to have my very first conversation with a black American.

Before I came to America, every white person I met spoke one European language and every black person I met spoke one African language and belonged to a tribe. I extrapolated from Africa to America and assumed the young black man I met in Monmouth, Oregon also could speak an African language.

I was born in Africa and my first words were in the Igbo language. I then became fluent in Pidgin-English and Standard English. I even studied Latin for 15 months!

By the dawn of the fourth millennium, humanity's 6,000 languages will have almost disappeared. The wisdom and knowledge embedded in each language also will have disappeared. The extinction of a language is equivalent to the extinction of a biological specie. Each language has unique features that are specific to it, and when it dies, knowledge passes from the earth that will never exist at any other time or place.

In a thousand years, when all 21st century languages will be as dead as Latin, perhaps our descendants will relearn my Igbo language so they can extract the wisdom and knowledge embedded in the language of my ancestors.

At the dawn of the fourth millennium, French could be extinct, no longer France's native language. Perhaps future generations will preserve endangered languages for posterity by programming super-intelligent, half-human cyborgs to speak them.

A thousand years from now, a linguist might write:

*A thousand years ago, a thousand languages were spoken in Africa. Today, those languages are extinct and only spoken by half-human cyborgs. The disappearance of Africa's languages has touched the human community, which is now outnumbered by cyborgs.*

As for me in the early 21st century, I am a language bigamist and a stranger to both Africa and America, a man who struggles to answer the simple question: "What language do you dream in?" My answer is this: I am a proud Igbo language polygamist who is "more" native in the English that he has adopted as his favorite "wife."

The new generation of Diasporan Igbos, born and raised in Europe or North America, cannot speak fluent Igbo. Their Igbo parents have lost their Nigerian citizenship and become "foreigners" in their children's country.

I was born in Akure, the Western Region of colonial Nigeria of British West Africa, in 1954. The first words I heard were in the Igbo language. Fifty years later, my father's last words with me were spoken across the ocean from Africa to America in the English language. I regret that I did not speak Igbo to my son, Ijeoma, or to my American wife of three decades, who is of African descent but cannot speak any African language.

Imagine it's the year 3010, the dawn of the fourth millennium and the start of the 31st century. The Internet has killed the diversity of the world's languages. Every person speaks the same language with some English words passed down from the 21st century. A news headline transmitted by telepathic email called t-mail announces,

“The Last Speaker of Igbo Has Died!” *Onye ikpeazu na asu asusu Igbo nwugo.*

The news story continues: “Susan Okafor, the woman who was the last known native speaker of the Igbo language of Africa has died in her home in Onitsha, Nigeria at the age of 126.”



This photo was taken approximately two days after I spoke to my first black American. Here I was standing outside the student union building. I was showing off the new trousers and shoes I had just purchased in Monmouth to replace the cotton trousers and sandals I had bought in the Onitsha market. A week later, I was advised to purchase a winter coat to replace the cotton sweaters I had on in this photo. (Philip Emeagwali, in Monmouth, Oregon, March 28, 1974).

## Lecture in Igbo Language by Philip EMEAGWALI

### Ichoputağhari Ihe Banyere Umu Igbo Furu Efu

*Ozi Nkwado N'di Igbo nke Mazi Chukwurah Emeagwali degara Igbo Cultural Association of Calgary, Canada n'oge emume afo ncheta Igbo*

August 23, 2003 na Calgary di na obodo Canada

N'di b'anyi ndeewo nu O!

Obi bu m so anwuli oge Mazi Kene Ufondu kpokurum ka m bia buru onye obia puru icha na emume ncheta N'di Igbo 2003 na Calgary. Ya mere nji were si ka m'gwa unu okwu nkwado.

Iji kwado emume unu, ana m akpoku nwa Igbo obula ka ochee echichi ma lotakwa ihe iriba ama puru icha Umu Igbo gara mba imilikiti afo gara aga megasiri ikwado oganiru madu.

Ewerem ubochi Icheta Igbo were lota Mazi Jubo Jubogha nke ana etu "Ja Ja," onye nke atoro na oru n'afu iri na abua na gbagide mbo we buru Eze Igbo n'Opobo. N'di ulo ikpe Britain kpurulu Mazi Jubogha ga n'ulo ikpe ha ebe ha noro maa ya ikpe na odara iwu site na imebi "nkwu udo okwere" na kwa "igbochi nkwu uzo azum ahia". Na itaya ahuhu, achupuru Mazi Jubogha nobodo ya, buru ya ga n'obodo anakpo Barbados na kwa mba nke St. Vincent, di na West Indies.

Iji kwanyere ya ugwu furu ya, ndi mba Barbados etinyena akuko maka ndu ya na akuko iro ha, makwa na ukwe.

Ozo, ewerem ubochi Icheta Igbo were kene Mazi Olaudah Equiano, nwata ozo dikwa afo iri na abua erepulu n'oru onye nke jiri aka ya dere si: "Abu m Igbo". Ewerem ukpa ekene bunye Mazi Equiano onye nke mere ka anyi nwee akuko edere ede banyere odinani na omenani ma kwa emume N'di Igbo oge gboo. Ekenekwasim Mazi Equiano ka osi were mee ka uwa ghota ijo ihe din a igbo oru, soro nua ogu iji kwusi ya, ma dekwa akwukwo banyere afo agwa di na igba oru.

Abu na esota bu abu nke ejiri were kwaa obere nwa anyi Olaudah furu efu:

"Obu Onye ka anyi na acho? Obu Onye ka anyi na acho?"

Ikwuano ka anyi na acho.

Obu iyi ka ochulu? Biko nya nata.

Obu ugbo ka ojelu? Biko nya nata.

Ikwuano ka anyi na acho."

Mà'zi Ikwuano bu ichie, burukwa nna-mmuo. N'di ogu akwukwo dum, iji bobo ya ndu anwu anwu, nyere ya aha otutu: "N'na akuko banyere ndi ojii."

Ewerem ubochi N'cheta Igbo were kponite mmuo Umu Igbo nwoke, nwanyị na umuaka ndi Georgia's Sea Islands ndi nke miri rigbadoo oge ha siri na ugbo oru manye na miri iji gbanari agbam oru. Akuko ndi anakpo n'oyibo ndi Sea Islands nerota etu "Oru ekwe ekwe Umu Igbo", ndi anya miri juru anya siri buru iga akponyere ha na olu makwa na ukwu, kwa akwa alili, were otu olu were tie nkpu akpata oyi na asi:

"Oshimiri butel'anyi, Oshimiri g'ebu anyi laa"

Omume dike nke Umu Igbo, makwa inupu isi ha nupuru banyere agbam oru madu ewerela onodu anwu-anwu na akuko makwa abu ndi bi na ikpere miri Georgia, ndi anakpo ndi Gullah.

Ka mmuo Umu Igbo furu Efu soro unu n'akuku n'ije unu, gbanyere unu izu okwu, makwa dube unu na ochucho amam ihe na ako n'uche unu.

Mà'zi Ikwuano kowara onwe ya sin a ya bu "obia na obodo oghotaghi" Dika ndi obia na obodo Canada, ajalum unu ike na mmukwu oghere nke a unu weputara maka umu Igbo iji makorita onwe ha.

N'di ba anyi si na njiko ka, mmadu ka e ji aba.

Igbo Kwenu!

[Chukwurah nwa Emeagwali bu onye onicha. Mà'zi Emmanuel Chinyeaka Okoli de re nka na asusu Igbo. Udo di ri gi, nwannem.]

## FACTOIDS

About twenty *Ndi Igbo* lived in Monmouth, Oregon during the 1970s, including these:

Boniface N. Madubom. (late 1960s)

Philip Emeagwali (March 24, 1974)

Abai Ibe (March 1974)

Hyacinth Anagbogu (August 1974)

Onesimus O. Okechukwu (August 1974)

Raphael O. Ezeokonkwo (September 1974)

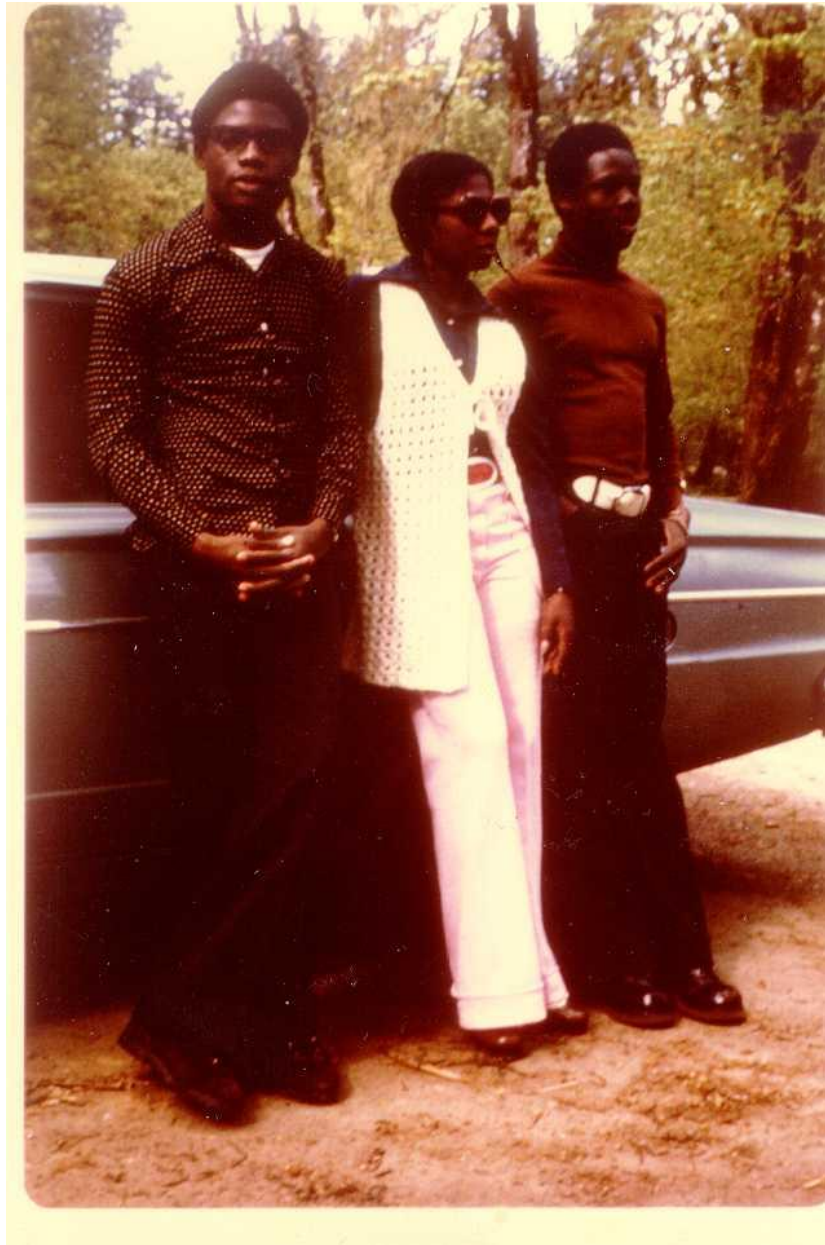
Evelyn Okeke (All Africa Athlete, September 1974)

Sunny Ambrose Okorie (July 1975)

Peter Ozoh (January 1976)

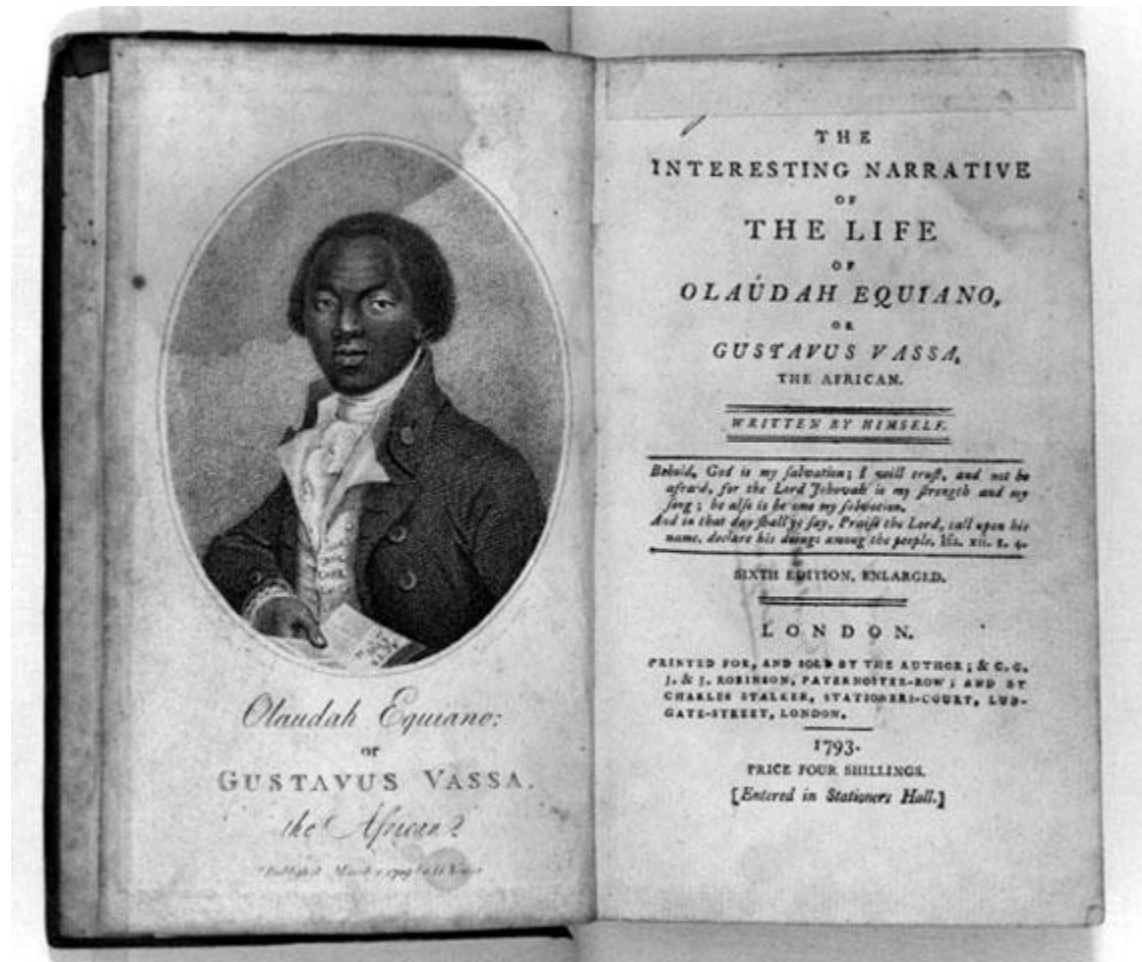
Ferdinand Ejinaka and his older brother (1976)

Okey Ozoh (1978)



On an outing to Corvallis, Oregon with my Igbo-speaking friends Mrs. Kalu and Abai Ibe. You can tell we were new in United States because our bodies are still shaped like a coca-cola bottle. This photo was taken by Kalu's husband [Kalu Kalu] A few days later, Abai and I became roommates. (L-R: Philip Emeagwali, Mrs. Kalu Kalu, Abia Ibe. April 1974, near Corvallis, Oregon)

## Igbo Pioneers in the Americas



*Equiano's Travels: His Autobiography: The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa the African Life.* Paul Edwards, editor. London: Heinemann, 1967.

Captured and sold into slavery at the age of 11. Equiano's autobiography, "The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa the African, Written by Himself, 1789 " was an international bestseller and earned him the title "father of modern black literature."

### Olaudah Equiano

**Also known as:** Gustavus Vassa

**Birth:** 1745 in Nigeria

**Death:** April, 1797 in London, England

**Nationality:** Nigerian

**Occupation:** Writer, Abolitionist

**Source:** *African Biography*. 4 vols. U\*X\*L, 1999.

"The shrieks of the women and the groans of the dying rendered the whole a scene [on the slave ship] of horror almost inconceivable."

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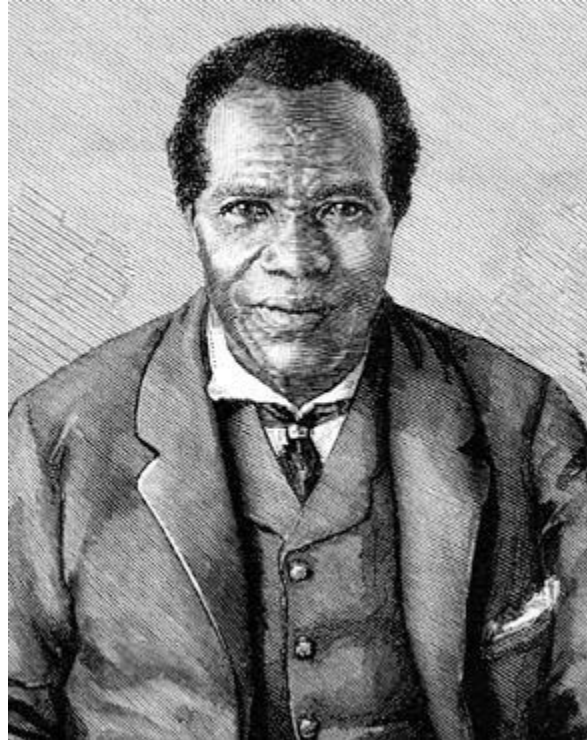
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2. Isichei, Elizabeth. "The Igbo Roots of Olaudah Equiano." *Journal of African History* 33.1 (Jan 1992): 164(2).
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## Edward Wilmot Blyden



Edward Wilmot Blyden, a renowned Pan-Africanist, declared himself: "a true son of the Eboe tribe." Blyden's writings inspired Marcus Garvey, W.E.B. DuBois, Nnamdi Azikiwe, and Kwame Nkrumah.

## Ja Ja of Opobo



**Birth:** c. 1820

**Death:** 1891

**Nationality:** Nigerian

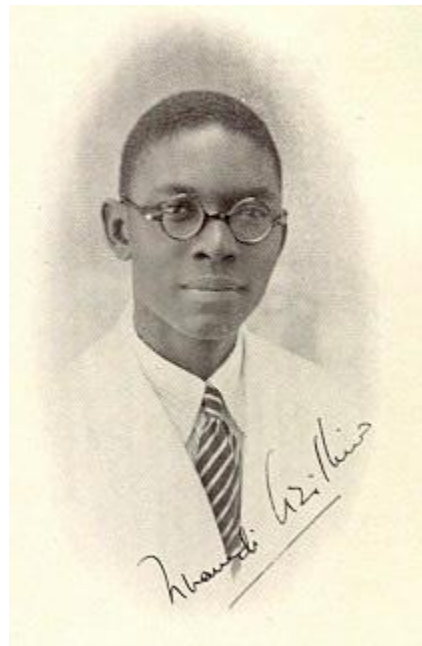
**Occupation:** revolutionary, ruler

**Source:** *Historic World Leaders*. Gale Research, 1994.

"Several of the Igbos who were brought to the [Niger] Delta as slaves showed an outstanding ability to triumph over circumstances. Of these, the most celebrated and the most outstanding was Ja Ja of Opobo. . . ." Elizabeth Ischei

## Nnamdi Azikiwe

Nnamdi Azikiwe was one of the first Igbo-speaker – excluding the slaves - to visit the United States. His early experiences in the United States inspired me to emigrate to Oregon.



## William Balfour Baikie



The Igbo expressions *Ala Bekee*, *Ndi Bekee* translates to "land of Baikie (William Balfour Baikie), white people." In 1857, the Obi of Onitsha ("king") negotiated with William Balfour Baikie for the establishment of a British trading post at the banks of the River Niger. Dr. William Balfour Baikie was buried at the old cemetery in Sierra Leone.