

# Why are there so many light-skinned Igbos?



Nigerian Igbos. As you can see the yellow tint in the skin tones.



Some of my Family – IGBOS who've ancestry been here for centuries from the slave trade.

Many factors may have contributed to this phenomenon, including: the environment, genetics, social preference and historical events. The article below explores these different theories to see how plausible they are.

## **An Analysis of Fair Skin Amongst Igbo People**

The question of why some Igbo people have fair skin is a common one, but is it even accurate? And if so, why are there so many fair-skinned Igbos compared to other African ethnicities? In this article, we'll be exploring why these perceptions about Igbo people exist and some of the possible reasons for this phenomenon.

### **What is light skin?**

Amongst Africans from the continent, determining whether someone is deemed dark or light skinned is based on whether or not their skin complexion is lighter than the average skin tone of the others around them. This is the definition we're referring to in this article.

Many Igbo people who fall into this category are phenotypically similar to those with darker skin (hair texture/nose etc).

### **So, why is it just Igbos that are stereotyped this way?**

First and foremost, it's important to note that the Igbos are not the only African ethnicity with significant numbers of lighter-skinned individuals. In fact, many West Africans have brown or light brown skin.

Nigeria's three largest ethnic groups are the Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo. These groups are often what people think of when they hear the word Nigeria. In comparison to the other major ethnic groups, the Igbo population tends to have a greater number of light-skinned individuals. Consequently, Igbos are often associated with having fairer skin.

### **Is there a plausible explanation as to why?**

Africa is the most visually diverse continent when it comes to skin color, with variations attributed to factors such as sun exposure, temperature, natural selection, migration, and mixing. This article aims to utilise scientific and historical information to explain why mid to light brown skin tones are prevalent in Nigeria's coastal areas, and why there are higher concentrations, particularly among the Igbo, Ibibio, Efik, and other southeastern ethnic groups.

### **Environment, adaptation and natural selection**

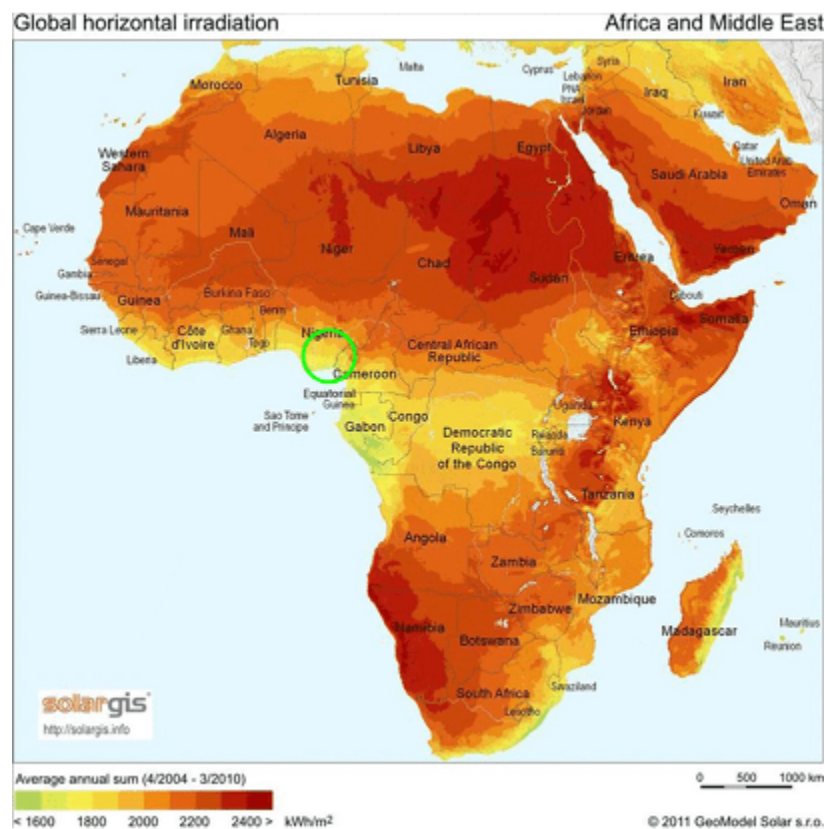
Across the world, different ethnic groups have different skin tones. These skin colour variations likely occurred due to thousands of years of natural selection, resulting in people with traits that are better adapted to their environment.

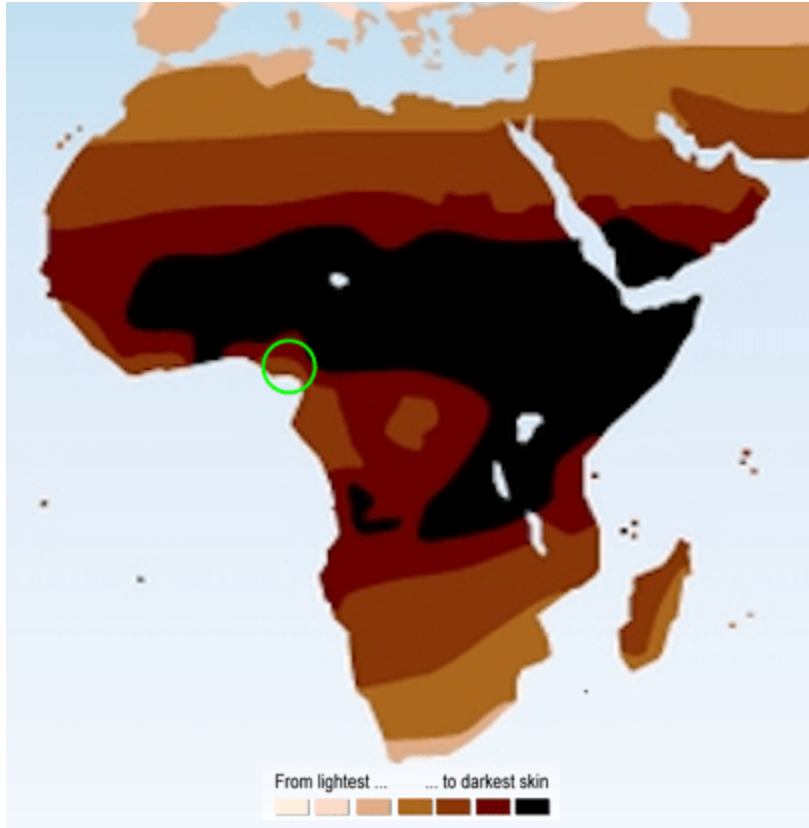


It's well known that people with darker skin have more melanin. Melanin protects you from the sun's UV rays and it assists the body in vitamin D production, an essential prohormone the body needs to stay healthy.

Since different parts of the world have different levels of sun ray exposure, it makes sense that people's skin adapts to suit their environment over time. For example indigenous Nilo-Saharanans in the Sahara desert tend to have darker skin than those in more tropical regions like southern Nigeria, where vegetation provides more protection from the sun's rays.

**The maps below seem to show some correlation between darker skin and higher solar intensity.** *Note: Due to several factors, some listed in this article, this may not be totally indicative of how skin tones are represented today.*



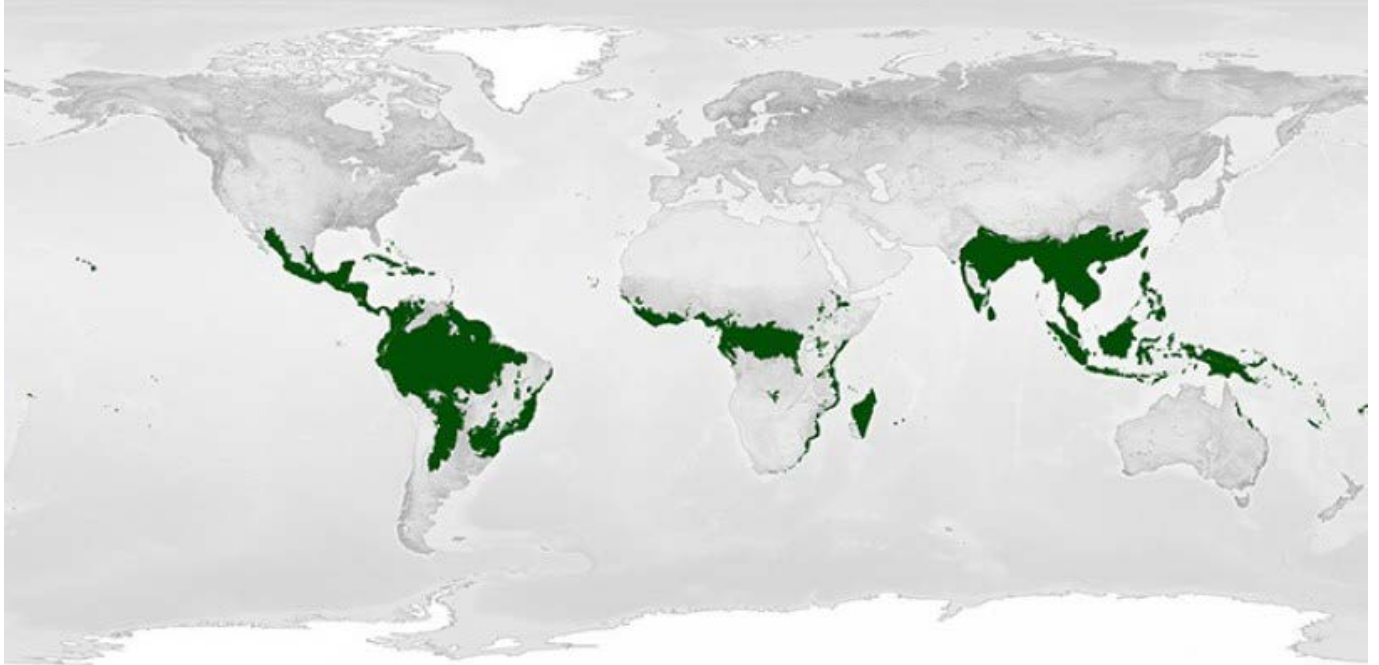


\*\*\*Green circle: Igboland in South East Nigeria

\*\*\*[Resource](#) (Skin tone and UV Radiation)

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As demonstrated below, much of South-Eastern Nigeria lies within the ‘rainforest’ regions of the world. In these regions, plants provide protection against sunlight, [with only 2-15%](#) of the sun’s light reaching the ground. From an evolutionary perspective, it may be logical to assume that less melanin would be required to protect the skin in these regions. However, it’s important to note that there are many individuals with darker skin in these areas, making this argument less compelling.



[Image: NASA Earth Observatory](#)

In addition to the environment and climate, several complex and nuanced evolutionary factors may influence regional variations in skin colour. Let's look at some other things that could be at play.

### **Natural Selection and Social Preferences**

It has been suggested that a societal preference for lighter skin may be a factor contributing to the higher numbers of fair-skinned Igbos. While societal preferences can account for certain traits appearing more frequently, this doesn't appear to be the case with skin tone variations among the Igbo people.

In situations where societal preferences for a specific trait exist, groups of people with that preferred trait tend to occur in more concentrated areas. However, amongst the Igbo people, skin tone variations appear to be random. It's widely recognised that drastic variations in skin tone can even occur within a single nuclear family. So, while it's possible that societal preferences play a role in skin tone perceptions among the Igbo people, it may not be the driving force behind the prevalence of fair skin.

### **Genetics**

Previously, we examined the study '[Why do some Nigerians have ginger hair?](#)', and found that **1 in 500 to 1 in 1000 southern Nigerians have reddish hair/skin**. The study showed many people with this trait are from Bini and Igbo areas. Although the phenotype is rare, most would be classified as 'light skinned'. Additionally, people with various kinds of albinism can also be classed as having light skin.

## **Random Genetics**

Another genetic reason for the 'light skinned' trait could be unexplainable random gene variants.

## **Mixing**

As populations migrate and interact, it's inevitable that people will mix, leading to a blending of physical characteristics and ancestry. This is particularly evident in countries like Sudan, where the average person today has mixed Arab and indigenous black African ancestry, which can be seen in their complexion and other physical traits like hair texture.

Similarly, some have suggested that Igbos have lighter skin because of mixing with one or more of the following.

1. **Semitic/Hebrew/ Jewish people**
2. **Portuguese slave traders**
3. **British slave traders+**

But how plausible are these theories? Let's look at each to see if they hold water.

### **1) Mixing with lighter-skinned Semitic/Hebrew/Jewish people**

There is a popular theory that suggests Igbo people have Jewish or Hebrew ancestry, but this claim lacks credible evidence.

Although there are some similarities in religious practices, such as [male circumcision](#), these traditions are common in many cultures around the world and do not necessarily indicate a connection to Judaism.

Taking a closer look at historical timelines, it's most likely that Igbo people (like many indigenous Africans) predate [Hebrews](#) and many other Semitic peoples.

Additionally, the traditional Igbo religion and way of life includes practices that are considered non-kosher within the Jewish faith, such as the use of idols and the consumption of non-kosher foods like crayfish.

Concluding, while there are dedicated proponents of this theory, there is no credible evidence to support it. For further information and references, stay tuned for our upcoming article on this topic.

### **2) Transatlantic Slave Trade: Mixing with the Portuguese**

When it comes to the Portuguese and their involvement in the transatlantic slave trade, their impact on the genetic makeup of the Igbo people was limited. While the Portuguese arrived on the shores of West Africa in the late 1400s and began trading with the Bini Kingdom in 1485, they didn't venture far inland due to illnesses like yellow fever and other difficulties. Instead, they relied on coercion and negotiations with natives to bring enslaved people to the port, which

meant that it's unlikely that any significant numbers Igbo people had direct interaction with the Portuguese since the majority of them lived inland.

While the Portuguese had more recorded interaction with the Akan people in Ghana and the Awori of Lagos, in comparison to Igbos, both groups would be described as having fewer occurrences of lighter skin people on average. If there had been prevalent mixing between the Portuguese and West Africans, it would be more evident among the groups they had significant interactions with.

Typically, for people to show visible DNA from another ethnicity, the incoming group must establish structured colonies where significant numbers of people (usually men) have access to women to bear children. This was the case with the Portuguese in Brazil. However, their intention on the coast of Nigeria was to create a trade link for business purposes. As a result, their influence on the genetic makeup of Igbo people would have been negligible.

### **3) Transatlantic Slave Trade: Mixing with the British**

The transatlantic slave trade between the British and the Igbos in the 1700s had a limited impact on the genetic makeup of the ethnic group. According to historians, British slave traders did not venture deep inland where the Igbos resided. Instead, they relied on negotiating with native rulers along the seacoast, who then worked with Igbo middlemen to bring enslaved people down to the coast. This method did not provide ample opportunity for intermixing between the two groups.

Furthermore, it was mainly African men who interacted with European men during the slave trade. Women who interacted with white slavers were usually sold into slavery, not impregnated by a European and sent back to their village.

Interestingly, a significant number of fair-skinned Igbo individuals were among those who were enslaved and transported to Jamaica. Due to their light skin tone, they were referred to as "[red eboe](#)" – a term that combined the English word "red" with the name of their ethnic group (Igbo). This observation suggests that the characteristic of fair skin was present among the Igbos before the transatlantic slave trade.

### **4) British colonisation and returnee enslaved peoples**

According to some theories, British colonisation may have played a role in the existence of light-skinned Igbos. During the colonial period, many British individuals were serving the interests of the empire and had interactions with native Igbo people. It's possible that some had children with Igbo women. However, intermixing was not that common, and the short period of colonisation is unlikely to account for the millions of light-skinned Igbos today. Additionally, previous records show that lighter skin among Igbos was already documented before the colonial period, as seen with the term 'red eboe' used in the Jamaican slave trade.

It's worth noting that none of the aforementioned theories account for the fact that light-skinned Igbos do not typically exhibit significant differences in other phenotypes, such as hair texture or nose shape, that would suggest substantial admixture with non-African people.



Another theory proposes that the presence of European or non-African DNA in Igbo society could be attributed to enslaved individuals returning to Africa and intermixing with other Nigerians. This may explain some individuals who have minor percentages of non-African DNA, but it still does not explain the pre-slavery existence of light-skinned Igbos.

## Conclusion

It's difficult to draw a concrete conclusion even after this exercise. Though we could argue that a combination of things could be at play, including the environment, random genetics and natural selection-based social preferences, no conclusive evidence can confirm any.

Ultimately, genetics determine how much melanin a person produces, and this can vary significantly even amongst siblings with the same bloodline. It's crucial to note that one's skin complexion does not make one more or less Igbo than someone with a different skin tone. As African people, we must learn to appreciate our skin colour, as the rest of the world often will not.

To learn more about Igbo culture take a look at our [culture page](#).

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## \*\*\*References

- Extract from John Oriji: Political Organization in Nigeria Since the Late Stone Age: A History of the Igbo People, Page 29

Middle Late Stone Age (Foraging), 8000–3000 B.C.

Upper Late Stone Age (Incipient Agriculture), 3000–500 B.C.

Iron Age, 500 B.C.–800 A.D.

Classical Period, 800 A.D.–1000 A.D.

Intermediate Period, 1000 A.D.–1300 A.D.

Early Atlantic Period, 1400 A.D.–1600 A.D.

Atlantic Period, 1700 A.D.–1800 A.D.

End of Slavery, Nineteenth Century

- Extract from Adiele Afigbo's Essays, Edited by Toyin Faola, Page 19.

Afigbo's seminal contribution is to trace the path of the Igbo Ukwu art (even if he does not say so) and turn the searchlight on the Niger-Benue confluence based on archeological, linguistic and genetic data. He is assured of the scientific bases for his conclusions. Since history is an incurable jade, with a habit for consorting with various disciplines with abandon, Afigbo argues that the migratory history of Ndigbo that occurred over 6,000 years ago could be reconstructed by deploying the resources from "geography, climatology, geology, palynology, ecology" that probe reality.

- [\\*\\*\\*Jewish Virtual Library, Timeline: Estimated 3600 BC onwards](#)

Much more information to come. We must be born again. This evidence presented is for our awakening and education.



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