



## IN MEMORIAM

John U. Ogbu  
Professor of Anthropology and Education  
Berkeley  
1939 — 2003

John U. Ogbu was a major figure in the application of anthropological theories and methods to problems related to minority education in the United States and abroad. Born on May 9, 1939, in the village of Umudomi, Nigeria, John attended a Presbyterian high school about 100 miles from that village. Later he went to a teachers' college and taught Latin, mathematics, and geography for two years in a missionary high school. As part of his plan to enter the ministry, he was sent to Princeton Theological Seminary. Upon realizing that in order to work for the church in Nigeria, he needed to know more about his own country, John turned to anthropology, a subject he had never even heard of before coming to the United States.

So it was that John came to the University of California, Berkeley in 1961, and in effect he never left. He earned his B.A. in anthropology in 1965, writing his honors thesis on "The Transmission of Oral Literature among the Ibo." Then followed his M.A. in 1969 and his Ph.D. in 1971. In 1968, he had begun his doctoral fieldwork in Stockton, trying to discover why some children, especially minority children, performed poorly in school. His dissertation was published in 1974 as "The Next Generation: An Ethnography of Education in an Urban Neighborhood". In some ways, he never stopped thinking about this question, as is evident from his very last book that investigated why middle- class African- Americans seemed to lag behind whites, in this case, in the well- to- do Cleveland suburb of Shaker Heights: *Black American Students in an Affluent Suburb* (2003).

In 1970, John was already an acting assistant professor of anthropology and he was immediately regularized in 1971 upon completion of his degree. He received tenure in 1976 and was promoted to the professorship in 1980. He was a meticulous and caring teacher. His course syllabi were models of clarity. One reason for this was his own awareness that he had never really lost his original Nigerian accent in spoken English. He knew that some students had difficulty in following his lectures and for that reason he often distributed detailed outlines of the lectures in advance to his classes.

One of John's most important theoretical formulations involved the distinction between "voluntary" and "involuntary" minorities. The latter term referred to minority groups that did not originally come to the United States by choice, e.g., they were forcibly brought here and sold as slaves. John argued that the resultant cultural attitudes and behaviors of such groups tended to encourage resistance to the imposition of educational norms and values by the dominant society. Accordingly, John claimed poor performance in schools by minority students was essentially a matter of cultural factors, and not attributable to any alleged inherent racial genetic or pedagogical deficiency. John's analysis of this issue has had an enormous impact upon scholarship in many disciplines including education, psychology, and sociology.

Ogbu received many honors for his pioneering work in education. In 2000, a book was published entitled *Eminent Educators: Studies in Intellectual Influence*. It focused on just "four intellectual giants of the 20th century." One of these was the philosopher John Dewey and one of the others was John Ogbu. John died on August 20, 2003. In November of 2003, at the annual meetings of the American Anthropological Association,

the Council on Anthropology and Education presented to John posthumously The George Spindler Award for Distinction in the Anthropology of Education.

John is survived by his wife Marcellina Ada and five children. He leaves behind many students who remain ever grateful for his devoted mentorship as well as sad colleagues who will always remember his sage counsel and hearty laugh.

Stanley Brandes  
Alan Dundes  
Laura Nader