

IGBO MIGRATION AND THE FUTURE OF TRADITIONAL PARADIGMS

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Abstract

This paper studies Igbo migration and its consequences on the cultural and traditional paradigms of the Igbo. Geographically speaking, Igbo land is located in the South Eastern region of what is known as Nigeria. The southern part of Nigeria exhibits a wide variety of topographical features. It is situated within the parallels of 6 and 8 east longitudes and 5 and 7 north latitudes. As a culture area, it is made up of Enugu, Anambra, Imo, Abia and parts of the Delta, Cross River, Akwa Ibom and Rivers States of Nigeria. In its status as an ethnic group, the Igbo share common boundaries with other ethnic groups: eastward, the Yakos and Ibibios; westwards, with the Binis and the Isokos, Warri; northward, with the Igalas, Idomas, and the Tivs, and southward, the Ijaws and Ogonis. Not minding their geographical localization, the Igbo has the tendency of the Igbo to migrate to other lands and consciously decide to settle, build homes and develop those lands. Some even assume traditional titles and begin to command influence in the Diaspora unlike other people who migrate to other lands, acquire wealth and repatriate the wealth to develop their homeland. The Igbo deviation from the grand norm of global migration philosophy has created a strange culture that raises fundamental questions about the traditional paradigm of the Igbo. The method of research employed in this paper is the historical and hermeneutic methods of investigation. It argues that in spite of Igbo migration, her traditional paradigms will not go extinct.

Keywords: Igbo, African, Traditional, Culture, Religion Paradigm, Migration, Diaspora.

Introduction

No time in recent memory has the threat to the lives and wellbeing of the Igbo people, both at home and in diaspora been more pronounced than in the last decade. In many northern Nigerian cities, Igbo businessmen and workers live in perpetual fear of losing their lives and properties to indiscriminate and bloody attacks directed against non-indigenes. In western Nigeria, the businesses of Igbos have come under threat from the anti-Igbo rhetoric and actions of some Yoruba elite and traditional rulers. The partial demolition of the popular Ladipo Spare Parts Market by the authorities of Mushin Local Government Area of

Lagos State and the threat to cast the Igbos in Lagos into the Lagoon over governorship election by the Oba of Lagos are just recent occurrences. Outside Nigeria, Igbo people have been victims of xenophobic attacks directed against African immigrants in South Africa and have been executed in some East Asian countries for various drug offenses and crimes without proper legal representation. With these developments arise the questions: What are the factors that encourage the emigration of Igbos? Have the Igbos brought the miseries and challenges they face upon themselves? Have government officials at home and abroad done enough to protect the rights of Igbo? Where should the Igbo run to? How does mobility and movement shape and fulfill the Igbo's life and story? What is the role of travel as an escape from economic adversity? What lessons does the variety of experiences gained provide the traveler, from the personal to the political, and from the physical to the spiritual? This paper recalls the penchant for global travel of Ndigbo, eternal sojourners, wandering Jews, and the effect of such on their destiny.

The Igbo of Eastern Nigeria

A fundamental step in our study of Igbo migration is the identification of the spatio-cultural horizon of the Igbo cultural space. According to Onuh (1991), by way of definition, "Igbo" is both a language and the name of an ethnic group or tribe in Nigeria. The Igbo is a recent development in literature; they were formally called Ibo, Ibu, Eboe, Ebo, Egboe, Heebo and Hackbon. This is evident in literatures that emerged from between 1840 to 1940, basically the works of European missionaries like Schoen (1842), Baiki, W. B. (1856), Baiki (1856) and Meek (1944). There is, however, an etymological and lexical complexity surrounding the meaning of the term 'Igbo'. In the contention of Ekwuru (2009), the difficulty of arriving at a precise etymological and semantic clarity of the word "Igbo" has its trace in the unprecise nature of the history of the Igbo people. For Afigbo (1975a), compared to the state of research as regards origin in relation to other tribes in Nigeria, the Igbo history can without much exaggeration be described as *terra incognita*. However, Afigbo (1975b) further observes that the Igbos are not indifferent to this crisis of identity. Their experience of colonialism, and even the Biafran War has sparked off in them the quest for a historical identity. It is such that Isichei (1976) avers that no historical question arouses more interest among the present day Igbo people than the enquiry "where did the Igbo come from?"

As regards the territorial identity of the Igbos, Uzozie (1991:4) observes that "To date, there is no agreement among ethnographers, missionaries, anthropologists, historians, geographers and politicians on the definition and geographical limits of territory".

Ekwuru (2009) states that any attempt to introduce who the Igbo is poses a lot of problems in all aspects of its academic conceptualizations. This notwithstanding, the Igbo people as a single people even though fragmented and scattered, inhabiting a geographical area stretching from Benin to Igala and Cross River to Niger Delta. They speak the same language which gradually developed various dialects but understood among all the groups. Their cultural patterns are closely related, based on similar cults and social institutions; they believe in a common Supreme Being known as Chukwu or Chineke. Two theories have emerged in response to the question of the origin of the Igbo. There is, *the Northern Centre Theory* which Onwuejeogwu (1987) posits that the Igbos migrated from five northern centre areas, namely: the Semetic Centre of the Near and Far East, the Hermatic Centre around Egypt and Northern Africa, the Western Sahara, the Chadian Centre and the Nok Centre. The second historical hypothesis is the *Centre Theory of Igbo Heartland*. According to Jones (cited by Isichei 1976), the early migrations of the proto-Igbo originated from the areas termed as the Igbo heartland, such as: Owerri, Okigwe, Orlu and Awka divisions.

Geographically speaking, Njoku (1990) posits that Igbo land is located in the South Eastern region of what is known as Nigeria. The southern part of Nigeria exhibits a wide variety of topographical features. It is situated within the parallels of 6 and 8 east longitudes and 5 and 7 north latitudes. As a culture area, it is made up of Enugu, Anambra, Imo, Abia and parts of the Delta, Cross River, Akwa Ibom and Rivers States of Nigeria. According to Uchendu (1965), in its status as an ethnic group, the Igbo share common boundaries with other ethnic groups: eastward, the Yakos and Ibibios; westwards, with the Binis and the Isokos, Warri; northward, with the Igalas, Idomas, and the Tivs, and southward, the Ijaws and Ogonis.

Igbo 'Migration' from 1460-1880

The dawn of the Industrial Revolution in the Western hemisphere brought with it the lack of manpower by European expanding empires, to work on new plantations that produced sugar cane for Europe, and other products such as coffee, cocoa, rice, indigo, tobacco, and cotton. Kanu (2015) avers that:

Contrary to the native Americans, Africans were excellent workers: they often had experience of agriculture and keeping cattle, they were used to a tropical climate, resistant to tropical diseases, and so the Atlantic slave trade became an integral part of an international trading system which was then guarded by international laws. (p. 12).

This period of carnage lasted for about five hundred years, during which an estimate of 12 million viable Africans were enslaved from their home lands to

locations around the Atlantic: Brazil, the Caribbean, and other Spanish-speaking regions of South America and Central America, the Atlantic Islands, continental Europe, and English-speaking areas of the North American mainland. Kanu (2008) reports that during the five centuries of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, Portugal was responsible for transporting over 4.5 million Africans, which is about 40% of the total. During the 18th century, however, when the slave trade accounted for the transport of a staggering 6 million Africans, Britain was the worst transgressor - responsible for almost 2.5 million. In this trade, human nature was depraved and fellow creatures manipulated in infinite variables. This marked the first movement of the Igbo from their homelands to an entirely new territory. Curtin (1969) avers that the Bight of the Biafra constituted one of the most important and steady sources of slaves during the Tran-Atlantic Slave trade. Korieh (2009) in a more detailed report writes that about one of every seven ship carrying slaves to the new world originated from the Bight of Biafra. Douglas (1997) reports further that of the 11.6 million slaves shipped to the New World, 1.7 million were taken from the Bight of Biafra. However, between 1730 and 1830, Northrup (1967) avers that of the slaves taken from the whole of Africa, the slaves from the Bight of Biafra accounted for about twenty five percent. There was a huge concentration of the Igbos in Chesapeake, now known as Virginia and Maryland, and in Jamaica and Trinidad. They met themselves without knowing that they have come from the same geographical area, until they began to speak in a language that they all understood and further realized the political, cultural and material similarities that bound them together and distinguished them from others.

Around 1760, discussions about the abolition of the slave trade had become a very important agenda in public debates. And the Igbos in diaspora were not exempted from it. Olaudah Equiano, a freed Igbo slave became the most popular black African in the British Empire towards the end of the 18th century. His autobiography which related the horrors of his capture and eventual selling into slavery, translated into several languages was a principal instrument in the abolitionist fight against slavery. His work also introduced so many people to the Igbo race. By 1787, the first group slaves were settled in Sierra Leone, the West Coast of Africa. Here a new Igbo consciousness emerged as the Igbos were the second largest group among the freed slaves in Sierra Leone. There in Sierra Leone they joined the Church Mission Society and became missionaries. Being the second largest group in Sierra Leone after the Yoruba, they and the Yorubas had become rival groups.

Igbo Migration from 1900-1970

Before the turn of the 20th century, missionaries and traders had no access into Igbo land. Lis (2015) reports that they had their dealings with traders from the ports in the bight, and middle men from those ports handled the trade with the inland areas. Moreover, mortality among the Europeans was very high, to the point that the hinterland was known as “The white man’s grave”. This terrified many and according to Isichei (1973), led to the importation of Sierra Leone missionaries who were of Igbo descent to Igbo land. With further intrusion of Christianity and Christian missionaries into Igbo land, traditional structures were destroyed and replaced by European patterns, one among many being the blowing up of Aro-Chukwu shrine from 1901-1902, an expedition organized by Moor.

Expeditions that destroyed traditional structures were organized by missionaries with government’s backing, explaining why Delano (1945) and Coleman (1971) observe that the Igbo see Christianity as another arm of colonialism who intruded into the Igbo society at the same time. However, with the advent of missionaries came schools and the rapid expansion of educational possibilities for the Igbo who were beginning to be educated at various levels and preparing them to take up responsibilities as teachers, clerks, managers, skilled laborers, artisans, etc. They therefore worked for western trading companies, missionary organizations and the colonial administration. They moved to different parts of Nigeria and became major minorities in Nigerian cities and urban centres. As they moved beyond the Igbo speaking area, they were restricted and many times refused entry into areas they wanted to go. This is evident in the Hausa Fulani Muslim dominated North that restricted the Igbos to *Sabon Gari* (a quarters for foreigners). Here they have remained strangers, in some places even to this very day.

Igbo Migration from 1970-2019

In 1970, the Nigerian Civil War came to an end. It was a war that brought the Igbo world to her knees, but it was also a war that would decide the future of the movement of the Igbo. After the war, the poverty and structural collapse of the time served as a catalyst that catapulted the Igbo to, not just different parts of Nigeria, but to different parts of the world in search of greener pastures. The major force that gave power to the migration of the Igbo is the Igbo apprenticeship system of wealth creation popularly known as ‘Imu-Olu’ (which

means learning work) or 'Imu-Ahia' (which means learning trade) or 'Igbo boy' (which means to serve) is a major factor in any discussion about the Igbo wealth creation or commerce. It is an apprenticeship system that purports a responsibility established businessmen [the nurturer] in a town, street or locale to pick up teenagers-young adults [the apprentice] from their homes and give them an informally formal, but raw and practical, cutthroat business education. This teenager might be a relative, sibling or non-relative from same region. The idea centres around taking them off the streets and the perilous tendencies of a idle mind to give them a purpose, worthy of emulation, so they can also continue the trend when they are established. With this, a great number of Igbo business men and women are now found in different parts of Nigeria doing trade.

Beyond the Nigerian borders, Igbo communities are found in different parts of Africa, like Cameroon, Equitorial Guinea, South Africa, Kenya, Ghana, Benin Republic, Togo, Cote d'Ivoire, among others. As immigrants, they have moved to different parts of the world. In the United States of America, it is estimated that 2,000,000 Igbos live there. There is also a huge number of Igbo people in different parts of Europe, even in places one would not imagine to find one. Very recently, Igbo migration to Asia, especially China and Malaysia has sky rocketed.

Igbo Migration and Traditional Cultural Paradigms

As people move from one place to another, and as they encounter the cultures of other people, there are bound to be cultural changes. This has great implications for Igbo migration in relation to her cultural paradigm. And by Igbo cultural paradigm, it is meant the Igbo philosophy of life or a framework of ideas, beliefs and values through which the Igbo interpret the world and interact with it. People within any particular culture, like the Igbo, share the same set of assumptions and similar expectations in how they perceive the world. The question at the heart of this research is to what extent would the Igbo paradigm change with the issue of migration? As the Igbo move across the world, what impact would it have on her cultural paradigm?

As the Igbo migrate to other parts of the world outside their home environment, there are bound to be changes in cultural expressions in the bid to survive in the new environments. These changes include the areas of language among others. The reasons for the changes are inherent in the Igbo flexibility and openness to new environments, methodologies and expressions. This flexibility is also anchored on the Igbo survival instinct. Like a chameleon, once the Igbo arrives a

new environment, he studies the new environment, and since he migrates, not just for the purpose of being, but for the purpose of succeeding, his or her instinct always tells him or her that to survive, you must adapt yourself to the new environment. Like the Chameleon, the changes do not touch on his substance as an Igbo. Thus, in the midst of these changes, as in language, he does not lose his Igboness, as it is not only language that makes an Igbo an Igbo.

Through migration, the Igbo traditional paradigm steps into parameter that broadens it. Therefore, migration helps the Igbo paradigm to broaden and thus grow. No paradigm has it all. It is only through cultural encounters that a person's cultural paradigm can grow. Thus, rather than understand migration as slicing machine of the Igbo paradigm, it is understood here as advancing the Igbo paradigm through encounter with other paradigms. Through migration, the Igbo traditional paradigm is also sold to the world- although some have lost their language through migration, especially among the young ones, there are also many others who have migrated with their languages and are speaking it in different parts of the world. Through migration, the Igbo language, spirit of industry, trade and survival instinct are also exported to different parts of the world. Igbo day celebrations abroad and Igbo kings are common sights within and outside Nigeria.

There is a flower I grew up to know as "African Never Die". It is flower that does not die and has the resilience to survive even in unfriendly environments. Even if it dries up as a result of drought, once the first rain drops, it begins to sprout up again. I would like to understand the Igbo paradigm within the context of this flower. Although the Igbo paradigm is clouded by migration, it can never be destroyed. The Igboness of the Igbo would always survive difficult times. No wonder, the unitary conception of reality that pervades his worldview remain obvious in a very remarkable way. In America or Belgium or China or South Africa, he does not fail to relate with his umunna, who make his world complete. Even when the Igbo speak not his language, his religiosity is not compromised. He believes that the human person is a composite of both spiritual and material elements, and while he provides for the material dimension of himself, he does not let the spiritual suffer. Even when he speaks not the language, his attitude to life and the afterlife ignites in him the need of achieving personal success if he must be happy in this life and the world of his ancestors. This success is personal and thus is at the basis of his spirit of egalitarianism, competitiveness and democracy. As the Igbo migrates to different parts of the world, his Igboness

would still live and he would always ne distinguishable from peoples of other climes.

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