

Migration and Cultural Identity Retention of Igbo Migrants in Enugu, Nigeria

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Abstract

Nigeria, a country of over 170 million people and 250 ethnic nationalities presents a complex picture of internal migration within its geographical entity. This study investigates the issues relating to cultural identity retention among a highly migratory ethnic group, the Igbo, whose origin is in the Eastern part of Nigeria. The study employs exploratory research design. Twenty-five in-depth interviews were conducted and two focus group discussion sessions were held with members of *Ezeagu Progressive Union* (E.P.U) in Lagos, a city in the south western Nigeria. Data were collected during the union's meetings and other cultural activities involving the members of the group. The study adopts thematic content analysis of its data. The findings indicate that the Igbo migrant union was a very active agency in the promotion of Igbo cultural identity among its members. Both material and non-material cultural elements were equally affected in the process of adaptation by the migrants. The study concludes that though the migrants indicated a high level of integration into their host culture, they continued to retain certain cultural elements of their community of origin.

Keywords: migration, cultural identity, union

Introduction

Internal migration according to Briney (2009:21) “remains one viable means of cultural diffusion among different ethnic nationalities. It enhances the diffusion of traits of a culture into another.” However, in the process of this diffusion, immigrants may retain certain elements of their culture. Cultural retention is the act of retaining the culture of a specific ethnic group, especially when there is reason to believe that the culture, through inaction, may be lost. Many African-American, European and Asian organizations have cultural retention programs in place. In Nigeria as in other parts of Africa, Home Town Unions of migrants have been at the fore in cultural retention activities.

Many studies on internal migration have concentrated more on issues relating to the reasons, distance and direction of moves as well as the process of decision making, with little attention directed on the retention of cultural or ethnic identity. As a matter of fact, it has often been assumed in sociological literature that ethnic identity of immigrants dissipates with the passage of time. This paper provides an empirical insight on the retention of indigenous cultural identity by the migrants as they encountered the cultural components of their hosts.

The process of migration involves culture contact resulting in cultural diffusion, assimilation and adaptation among different ethnic groups especially in cities where social interaction is more complex and dynamic than the ones in rural areas. In many instances according to Okwuchi (1992: 15), “... certain cultural elements of the host communities are assimilated while some aspects of the migrants’ culture are lost over time and younger generation may be ignorant about the existence of such cultural values and beliefs.” This problem becomes more visible when a particular ethnic group is highly migratory. The 1997 Nigerian Institute for Social and Economic Research’s study on migratory behaviour

among different ethnic groups indicated that the Igbo are the most migratory among the over 250 ethnic groups in Nigeria. In view of this, there is a high probability of loss of certain elements of the group's cultural identity as they move from one location to another in the quest for economic opportunities. The retention of some aspects of culture could engender stronger evidence of cultural identity among the migrants. Ayeomoni (2011) asserts that internal migration poses a threat to the continued existence of indigenous cultures of migrants in their host communities. With the main causes of internal migration being intercultural marriage, occupational opportunities, inter-ethnic clashes and so on, there is concern about the ability of the internal migrants to retain their cultural identity while simultaneously adapting to the host communities' norms and values. Sociological literature on social integration such as of Olurode and Olusanya (2005), enthused that culture contact as a result of internal migration could create some problems of adjustment in cultural components.

The retention of indigenous culture has been systematically undermined by the rate of internal migration among members of the different ethnic groups in Nigeria for various reasons including technology, social networking, foreign culture and most importantly, the need to adopt values and practices of their host communities in order to fit in and be accepted. Filani (2005) opines that the effects of intra-regional mobility and its influence on cultural identity due to interaction and interference of host communities are yet to be satisfactorily studied by sociologists. This gap in the empirical literature provides the impetus for this study. This study addresses these limitations by conceptualizing the culturally defined units of the indigenous group under study with intent to examine how their migratory behaviour is linked to the retention of their cultural identity. The main objective of the study is to describe the indigenous cultural components which

have been retained by the Igbo migrants in Lagos; and also, to try to examine the migrants' preferences of certain cultural elements of the host community.

Theoretical Framework

Given the importance of cultural identity, it is useful to apply the cultural diffusion theory to better understand culture diffusion as it occurs through internal migration. Cultural diffusion theory provides a framework that helps understand the dynamics of cultural assimilation, acculturation and how the cultural beliefs, values and social practices are transferred from one culture to another during the process of migration.

The Ezeagu Igbo

Uchendu (1965) poses that the Igbo are the second largest group of people living in South-eastern Nigeria. They are a non-homogenous, culturally diverse group, consisting of many subgroups. The Igbo ethnic nationality consists of several major cultural groups, each with their own variations in certain cultural practices. The historical trend of migration of the Igbo people to Lagos can be traced to the Nigerian civil war. The civil war, after which the federal government reabsorbed Biafra into Nigeria, stretched from 1967 until 1970 (Ajayi and Duruji, 2008).

Many Igbo emigrated out of the traditional Igbo homeland in the south eastern Nigeria due to an absence of federal presence, lack of jobs and poor infrastructure. The Igbo moved to such Nigerian cities as Lagos, Ibadan and Abuja. The majority of Igbo internal migrants are traders who leave the south-eastern part of Nigeria to other parts of the country to engage in business ventures, involving petty trading and importation of goods (Axel, 2006). This consistent internal migratory behaviour of the Igbo may invariably create a variation in their cultural identity. The

Ezeagu people of Enugu state were selected for the purpose of this study. Ezeagu was one of the Biafran towns to be captured by the Northern Nigerian forces at the outset of the Nigerian Biafran war in the late 1960s. This action, during which Nsukka's university was burnt down, contributed to the chaos and suffering in the conflict. As a result of this incident, many Ezeagu people became refugees as they had to leave their hometowns as a result of the toppling of Enugu, destruction of homes, hospitals, markets, schools and other infrastructure.

Methods

This study employed exploratory research design. Data collection focused on the material and non-material components of the migrants' culture. These data were gathered mainly through in-depth interviews, key informant interviews, focus group discussions and non-participant observations. The study population were members of the *Ezeagu Progressive Union* in Lagos, Nigeria. To gather the detailed data required, a triangulation of people and data collection methods involving multiple sources of information (non-participant observations, in-depth interviews, key informant interviews and focus group discussions) were used. Twenty-five in-depth interviews were conducted and two focus group discussion sessions were held with members of the Union in the study location. Purposive sampling technique was used to select the subjects for the study. Data were collected during the Union's meetings and other cultural activities involving the members of the group. The study adopted thematic content analysis of its data.

Results and Discussion

Data on the ages of the members showed that 46.3 percent were between 30 – 39 years, 25.9 percent were between the ages of 40 – 49 years, 14.8 percent were between

the ages of 18 – 29 years and 13 percent were 50 years and above. This makes those within 30 – 39 years category to be in the majority and 50 years and above, the least. The classification of movers in internal migration studies goes along with specific stages in the life course and can be related to different age groups (Rossi 1950). Roughly, one can distinguish between education related movers (age 16 to 20 years), workplace related movers (age 21 to 34 years), housing related movers (age 25 to 49 years), and retirement related movers (age 49 and above) (Gatzweiler, 1975). Internal migration pattern in most African settings indicates that many migrants tend to relocate to their hometowns in the final decades of life. This may account for the small number of people age 50 and above as members of the home town union selected for this study.

Residential patterns and outcomes are particularly informative in the study of adaptation of migrants, as residence is linked to patterns of social interactions and socialization (Wu, 2006). The residential pattern of the Igbo migrants in the study location indicates that many of them reside in different parts of the city in different types of accommodation. It is a common occurrence in many developing cities to have squatter settlements and urban slums as the principal locations receiving rural migrants. Congregation of migrants in urban villages is also common in many cities. This practice aggravates existing socio-spatial segregation and influences urban spatial development. On the other hand, some migrants choose to live in concentration to help maintain previously established social relations and assert their group identity. However, this is not the scenario for the migrants in this study, as many of them live in different parts of the city.

On the occupation of the respondents, the data showed that majority (76 percent) were traders, 9.3 percent

were civil servants/retirees, another 9.3 percent were taxi drivers and painters, 2 percent were students while teachers made up the remaining 3.7 percent. The occupational distribution of the migrants in Lagos indicates that internal migration among the Igbos was not restricted to those in a specific type of occupation. Of the total number of respondents, 51.9 percent had completed secondary school, 20.3 percent had completed tertiary education, 16.7 percent had completed primary education and only 11.1 percent had no primary school education. The Igbo are more likely to drop out of school after they have completed secondary school, to go into trading and commerce. This has been the trend among this ethnic group in recent times. Umeogu (1999) emphasizes that western education with all its pretensions lacks the traditional background which alone will make it useful to the Igbo people; thus the parents are directly responsible for the education of the child according to the culture of the people. In this regard, traditional apprenticeship in trading is very popular among the group.

The data on marital status of the respondents revealed that, 88.9 percent were married, 11.1 percent were single. Of the respondents, majority (86.4 percent) were married to spouses from Ezeagu in Enugu state. The other 13.6 percent, had spouses from other parts of the country. This included places such as Benue, Oyo, Ondo, and others. This suggests that there was a low tolerance for inter- ethnic marriage among the Igbo migrants. The findings showed that majority (70 percent) of the respondents were born in Ezeagu, while (30 percent) were born in other places. On the number of years the respondents have stayed in the study location, the data showed that majority (35.2 percent) have lived in Lagos for 21 – 30 years, 24.1 percent have lived in there for 11 – 20 years, 22.2 percent between five and ten years, and 16.3 percent have lived in for over 30 years. This demonstrates that majority of the respondents have lived in Lagos the longest.

Indigenous Cultural Components Retained by the Migrants

Cultural identity is important among the Igbo, and they attach particular importance to retaining one's culture. The indigenous cultural components which have been retained by the migrants in their host community can be classified under material and non-material culture. As regards material cultural components, clothing, food, religion and music, of the Igbo migrants in Lagos were examined. Also, their non-material cultural components were examined equally.

Non-Material Cultural Components Retained by Igbo Migrants in Lagos

The identity question for the Igbo migrants is fundamentally answered by the way they see themselves as a whole and in relation to their host community. Their identity is mainly defined by honesty and integrity. The Igbo describe themselves as sincere and keen to avoid trouble at all costs. A typical Igbo man would rather tell the truth than face the consequences of deception. As noted by a middle aged administrator and member of the Ezeagu Progressive Union: "Our character traits, because of the way we are being brought up, an average Ezeagu man is scared of problem, is scared of trouble, and because of that, he is abnormally sincere and honest" (Male

Administrator Lagos). Likewise, another member of the union stated:

In everything we do, we want to be sincere. That's our trait. In fact when you tell me say "I'm an Ezeagu man", an Ezeagu man is always like this {stretches out arms with opened palms}. You know, there is a language, 'nee m anya n'ishi', which is like watch my head (participant male).

Furthermore, the Igbo females carry themselves proudly as earth mothers of their ethnic group. They regard this to be an important aspect of their identity; that is, being faithful to their spouses, being able to care for their children and family as a whole through constant prayers on their behalf. Respondents whose behaviours were consistent with these typical Igbo characteristics were considered to have retained this aspect of their culture to an appreciable degree. As one member of the union puts it:

As you can see us, we have culture that go along with us you know, if you have one husband, you maintain that one husband, you don't run up and down, going here and there, that is our culture and goes with other things that you cannot easily find it in another place maybe if you have children, you make sure you take care of the children, take care of your family as a whole and always be praying for them. (Women wing).

Another aspect of the Igbo identity is determined by the degree to which the migrants identify with their own group. Membership in migrant union influences the retention of cultural identity. The migrant union members come together occasionally for meetings and celebrations. They typically maintain a constitution which guides the running of the union. They organize cultural celebrations and other activities to ensure that their traditional ways of doing things are preserved. In addition, the members of the union provide monetary support to their members during wedding or burial ceremonies from the union's purse. The role of the migrant union was highlighted by an interviewee thus:

For instance now, wedding. There's a particular amount of money that has been budgeted already for the celebrants or the family members. If it's the female, may be say about N10, 000 would be given to the parents as a

support, the same all over. But for burial, the association takes full responsibility. They shouldered the responsibility

when my father died, I never did anything. That's what they are gaining. Mortuary bills, casket, vehicle that took him home, everything. You know, those are the kinds of things that you enjoy from this union (Male participant).

The statement above indicates that the union renders both financial and social support to its members for personal and business purposes. The welfare arm of the union had within it a special budget allocated for such needs as they arose among the members of the union. During weddings, an amount of money, previously agreed upon by the union executives was contributed to the success of the event. Funerals also got contributions as well, especially in terms of mortuary bills to be paid by the family of the deceased and transportation of the corpse back to the hometown. Another interviewee stated:

We make contributions to celebrations of our members. It is part of our constitution. Welfare part:

If so and so is doing something, the welfare officer and the financial officer will look at the budget and give something. As members, we also help out may be with money or with other little things to show our support to the family. (Male/Executive).

Every member of the migrant union is qualified for the above listed benefits from the union. The pooling of resources for members' welfare engender members' satisfaction and in turn promotes membership continuity. This would help ensure that their culture are retained and passed on. In his study on migrant hometown associations, Orozco (2005) discovers that such associations allow the migrants to create a new sense of identity among migrants with similar backgrounds.

The values of the Igbo make up a substantial part of the non-material components of their identity which they have retained. The Igbo cherish the values of hard work and being able to provide for their families. Therefore, the business aspect of the Igbo is one that cannot be ignored. The members of the hometown association were mainly involved in business of buying and selling, as evidenced in the choice of occupation by the majority of them. It was from there that they were able to make contributions to the association as needed and to build homes in their host community and provide for their families. Ogbaa (1995) posits that the Igbo are well known in Nigeria as the most enterprising of the ethnic groups. The Igbo are a self-helping race who strongly believe in making themselves what they wish to be, hence the saying '*onye kwe chi ya ekwe*'. They are actively involved in buying and selling; and this trait is one of the driving forces of migration of the Igbos from one part of the country to another. Many Igbo people engaged in trading which eventually required more market outlets than could be found in their home areas. The new economic activities directly or indirectly engendered a migratory tradition among them (Ojukwu, 2009). An interviewee aptly captured the issue thus: "Normally, it's buying and selling. In business, it is buying and selling. We are good in buying and selling. You know, normal business...majority of us is involved in that" (Ezeagu men wing group).

Another important value of the Igbo that came up was that of returning to their hometowns to settle down after retirement. Oftentimes, migrants get so integrated into their host community that they may choose to remain there for the rest of their lives. Depending on their accumulated experiences from living among their hosts, they may desire to return to their hometown to settle after they have achieved their goals to a considerable extent. The traditional homeland of the Igbo people lies in the south-eastern region of Nigeria.

The geographical location of Igbo land lies between the great river Niger and Cross River State. This is quite a long distance from Lagos where the migrants reside. The decision of the migrants to return home therefore shows a commitment to the traditional Igbo value of burial within their hometown. The choice to either return home or stay in the host community is not an easy one to make and hinges on several factors such as age and availability of a home in their hometown into which they can settle when they return. An interviewee stated:

Yes, I just came here to work, once I am getting old now, I am above 50 now. So by the time I am 60, I would leave for my hometown to go and settle because actually what we do is when we finish from here, already our house is waiting for us in the village. We will go back there and settle down. (Female participant)

For the Igbo migrants, an age limit of 60 – 65 years was sufficient to leave their host community and return home to settle in their old age. The Igbo culture frowns at their dead being buried out of the hometown, thus most of them prefer to be in their hometown when they pass on so that the traditional burial rites would be properly carried on there. Returning home to settle is an important aspect of the traditional Igbo belief and they take steps and make plans towards it becoming a reality. This shows that the desire to return to their hometown was strong among the participants. One member of the association passionately expresses the issue thus:

That's my desire in Jesus mighty name o! Nobody prays to die here. In fact, that's what we are trying to do now. If you are 65 years, what are you doing here? So I have less than may be 15 years to go. I have to go home and... its better you die at home so that you don't give them stress. You know all these things before they start embarrassing my children. I have to return home o, because I don't

want them to embarrass me, or my children. Because when they embarrass my children, they are embarrassing me, whether I like it or not, in my grave. So I want to go home. (Male participant).

The religious belief of the migrants is another non-material component of culture. On the worship of deities and idols, Arinze (2011) saw deities or divinities as personifications of God's activities and manifestations of natural phenomenon. It is understandable therefore, that the Igbo would want to embrace the worship of particular deities in order to understand their world better. The worship of deities however, is gradually phasing out. Many family members have adopted Christianity as opposed to the olden days, where an average Ezeagu family home had a deity which they worshipped. Confirming the assertion above, a participant opined:

...well, there were more of traditionalists except now, everybody is moving towards church now. Let me tell you sincerely, an average Ezeagu family home has a deity they worship, they have a deity. But that's the olden days. Now, people have digressed into going to church. Everybody is now, in fact, people are now going to pull it up now. Some families could gather together and say come, we have to go invite one reverend father, one pastor to please go and help us uproot that deity from my family. But an average Ezeagu family, in the whole of Ezeagu o ; they have at least one deity they worship. But now, like I said, in the present 20th, 21st century now, a lot of people are now moving away from such things and moving into Christianity. (Male participant)

Uche and Obi (2010) claimed that in an African search for social integration; religion plays a prominent role as a social institution which evokes a deep sense of awe, sacredness and supernatural powers. For most of the Igbo migrants in the study area, they were born into the Catholic or Anglican system, and raised according to the Catholic or Anglican principles. It therefore became a way of life for them. With this type of background, they tended to seek out and join Catholic or Anglican churches in their host community in order to continue the tradition and raise their own children also by the same principles. According to Ihenacho (2004), Catholicism among the Igbo people of Nigeria is the African Christianity exemplar. Therefore, one would expect that in a group of Igbo people, more than half of them would be committed members of a Catholic church. Religion, to an Igbo man makes up a huge aspect of his cultural identity. It is one of the ways by which he relates to both himself and the people around him. One interviewee stated:

You should know 85 % percent of Igbo are Catholics, so you should know. I was born in a Catholic family. I have not been to any other church apart from catholic anyway and I don't pray to leave Catholic. I have told my wife that any day I leave Catholic, I am not going to church again, and that is it'. (Male/Business man).

Finally, the Igbo migrants in Lagos were observed to actively converse in their native language. This is not necessarily as a result of illiteracy or an inability to communicate fluently in the English language. Their union meetings and naming ceremony celebrations were conducted mostly in the Igbo language. Being Igbo implies being able to speak one of the dialects spoken in the Igbo area (at least more or less), and being familiar. As Bersselaar (1998) puts it, if an individual

shows himself both unable to speak Igbo and ignorant about the traditions of his culture, his claim to being Igbo is likely to be rejected.

Material Cultural Components Retained by the Igbo Migrants in Lagos

The material cultural components such as clothing, food, music, traditional wedding ceremony (*igba nkwu*), Masquerades *mmanwu*/ *Odo/omabe* festival, *Atiṣogwu* and the *Ikorodo* traditional dance, were observed among the Igbo migrants. The traditional wedding ceremony and other ceremonies such as naming ceremonies were well celebrated by the migrants. The celebrations were well detailed, and contained every nuance necessary to make it as totally traditional as possible. However, it was not always possible to organize the ceremonies in the exact same way as they were organized back at the hometown. Some adaptations were necessary to enable the celebrations to fit into the environment in which they now resided. Other situations arose where the migrants were unable to travel home for the major masquerade/*omabe* festival; then they sometimes organized similar programmes in order to be part of the celebration in the hometown. A participant captured an important component of the situation:

The adjustment is that, you know in the villages, their dressing will be different from what we dress. I think that is the only thing that is different. But the drum beats are the same; the dancing steps are the same. But the only difference is that may be the dressing. You know in the village, they will not wear... like us, we believe that when you wear *ishiagu* here, most of us will go and buy *ishiagu*. Like me, I borrowed from my own dad; I've not bought mine, so you use that. But back home, they'll go with theirs, some of them

would tie the ukwu akwa, they'll allow it to fall by one side.

Following the work of Eberts (2007:35), "movement either requires or promotes new adaptations. The adaptations employed by the migrants in their host community while practicing their cultural activities help to ease the adjustment process and encourage the retention of their cultural identity". Some of these adaptations included, but were not restricted to mode of dressing, and absence of masquerades. Changes made to such characteristics did not completely affect the total level of cultural identity of the people. Instead, it ensured that they were able to carry on such practices that helped to retain their cultural identity outside of their hometown.

Findings

The following are the findings of the study:

- The Igbo community under study is very active in the drive towards the retention of its cultural identity. The presence of the migrant Igbo union, a platform through which cultural activities of the Igbo are constantly practiced, is indicative of the strength of the Igbo community in Lagos. Monthly union meetings provide an opportunity for discussions, celebrations and cultural continuance for all migrant Igbo members of the union. The longer established participants also drew attention to the respect that the Igbo settlers had achieved in Lagos as hard working, law abiding members of the community.
- Having a cultural union where meetings are organised in the traditional way, has led to closer links to the Igbo culture and has provided a platform upon which the younger generation of Igbo migrants could learn more about their heritage. The union actively promotes and supports social interaction within the community, whilst monthly meetings provide members of the community an opportunity to understand and get closer to their culture.

Adler (2005) asserts that “the retention of cultural identity and values in a changing and multicultural world requires both awareness and effort”. A range of possible ways to display identity within and across cultural groups in the community should be examined as this could serve the double function of helping the migrants retain their culture and creating a platform for the indigenes to understand the culture of their settlers.

Conclusion

The present study explores the retention of the components of Igbo culture among the Igbo (Ezeagu) migrants in Lagos. Their core cultural identifiers rotate around the material and non-material aspects of their culture as examined in this study. These include their innate characteristics and beliefs, their religion, traditional festival and dance, dressing, meals, language and naming and wedding ceremonies. The retention of indigenous culture has been systematically undermined by the rate of internal migration among members of the different ethnic groups in Nigeria for various reasons including technology, social networking, foreign culture and most importantly, the need to adopt values and practices of their host communities in order to fit in and be accepted. Cultural identity retention has become integral part of internal migration research, the understanding of which has broader implication for segregation, integration and adaptation of migrants in their host community. As families and individuals settle in other geographical locations to make a life for themselves, the question of maintaining or preserving ties and connection with the source community arises, to enable children of immigrants to establish position culture identities.

In conclusion, the study used a small sample of participants in a community and focused on the effects of internal migration on a particular sub-group of the Igbo ethnic

nationality. Further research is particularly needed on a larger scope which will assist in obtaining reliable data that can be examined using even more sophisticated methodologies to explore and validate the concepts. Typically, a new domain for indicative cultural identity retention should initially be studied at the shallow levels of a cultural group, after which research on the domain will gradually move to deeper levels. We would suggest that a more substantial study which compares rather larger sample of home town unions in different geographical locations would reveal important outcomes on cultural retention and adaption of internal migrants.

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