

**AN ANALYSIS OF THE PUSH FACTOR IN RELIGIO-CULTURAL  
MIGRATION IN THE CENTRAL NIGER DELTA**

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**Abstract**

*The controversy generated by cultural migration in human history has challenged the curiosity of scholars of religion, culture, and history. This is owing to the prominent place the desire for improved human welfare occupies in the life of man. Thus, humans are constantly on the move in search of greener pasture. This study concerned itself with the critical investigation of the various push factor which over the years influenced human migration in the central Niger Delta and elsewhere. It identified internal crises, struggle for survival and the desire to create a kind of self-identity, as probable factors. The study applied Haas (2021) social migration theory as the lens of the work. It adopted the ethnographic and phenomenological approach in the discussion. The study observed that human history is dotted with instances of humans moving from one place to another. It concluded that this experience would continue so long as man remains insatiable.*

**Keywords:** Insurgence, Displacement, Niger Delta, Migration and Destination.

**Introduction**

Migration is a human phenomenon and essential for human survival. Human migration or movement dates back to the cradle of civilization. It suffices to say then that throughout human history, humans have always been on the move from one geographical and cultural location to another. Human migration may be predicated on two counts; first, because his wants are insatiable and second, because no one community or individual has reached the state of autarky. However, the reason for migration varies depending on the prevailing circumstance of the individual or group whether as an emigrant or immigrant or a journey man on transit, the dignity of the individual is incontrovertible. It is in recognition of this fundamental nature of man that it was enshrined as one of the

basic rights in the international codes and domesticated in the laws of sovereign states (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 13; 2017). The foundation of every other human right is, arguably, the rights to freedom of movement. It is recognised as the fundamental in Nigerian constitution and other state laws and instruments Throughout history, migration remains a dominant feature or driving force towards achieving this desire. Thus, the right to freedom of movement or migration are inalienable and fundamental. In corroboration, the United Nations notes that more and more people and groups are now on the move than ever and for various reasons. As it were, this may be owing to cultural, political, economic, ecological, or religious factors. In any case, as people migrate, they take along with them their culture (Obodoegbulam, Kpe, Amadi and Ngbara. 2019).

In the views of the United Nations migration agency a migrant “...is any person who is moving or has moved across international boarder or within a state away from his habitual residence”. Accordingly, this is regardless of (i) a person’s legal status, (ii) whether the movement is voluntary or involuntary, (iii) what the causes for the migration are and (iv) what the duration might be”.

It is not in doubt that humans are embodiments of their society as expressed in their economic socio-cultural and religious worldview. Hence, migrants take along with them their culture in which will account for the cases for the resilience and resurgence of the cultural elements even in the new society.

The purpose of this paper is to trace the different histories of migrations of some people in the Central Niger Delta. The study equally attempted to appreciate some factors that gave rise to the movement and explain how the various people coped in their new environment. The research observed that both internal and external factors were responsible or accounted for the incident of migration which took place in the region. Accordingly, the study applied Haas (2021) social migration theory as the lens of the work. To facilitate this study, the research combined the historical and ethnological methods in the discussion. It concluded that human migration is a continuous process in the history of man.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical frame of this study derives from Haas (2021) social migration theory. Haas (2021) opines that Functionalist migration theories generally see migration as a positive phenomenon which as it were, contributes to

productivity, prosperity and greater equality in origin and destination. According to him, functionalist migration theorists explained migration as an optimisation strategy, in which individuals (and sometimes families or households) explore in order to access higher and more-secure sources of income and other livelihood opportunities.

He submits that Neo-classical migration theory, as pioneered by Todaro (1969) and Harris and Todaro (1970), appears to be the strongest argument in favour of functionalist migration theories. Be this as it may, there are more theoretical currents that come under the functionalist migration paradigm. In this regard, the Push-pull models readily call to mind, as they present migration as a function of income and other opportunity gaps between origin and destination areas. These functionalist models hinge on the overt or covert suppositions that humans make rational decisions in order to brighten or secure their opportunity. The only major exception on this rule seems to be the new economics of labour migration (NELM) pioneered by Stark (1978, 1991), which conceptualises migration as the direct product of poverty and constraints as a household or family affair, (instead of an individual's) co-insurance strategy aimed at diversifying (instead of maximising) income through risk-spreading. Although it acknowledges the role of structural constraints in shaping migration decisions, NELM is also ultimately based his argument on the assumption that households are rational actors engaging in a long-term economic optimisation strategy. However, such accounts typically ignore how poverty, inequality, immigration restrictions, government repression and violence can prevent people from migrating, cause their forced displacement or compel them to exploitative work condition. This explains why the social and economic benefits of migration often accrue disproportionately to the already better-off in origin and destination societies.

Haas (2021) noted that one of the criticisms against the functionalist migration theory is its reductionist character. The 'push-pull' reasoning on which its explanations are based strongly resonates with intuition but has proved to be inadequate and often misleading in understanding real-world migration processes. In the view of Haas (2021) the Push-pull models could not convincingly explain migration as a social process because they listed a number of static factors that openly play some role in migration without specifying their role and interactions or providing a structural account of the social processes which very often induce population movements. Skeldon (1990, cited by Haas

(2021), contended that push-pull models leave us with a list of factors, all of which can clearly contribute to migration, but which lack a framework to bring them together in an explanatory system, leading Skeldon to conclude that “the push-pull theory is at best, a mere platitude”.

Considering the arguments conversed above, it appears that at first sight, functionalist and historical-structural accounts of migration seem diametrically opposed in their understanding of migration, in terms both of its social causes and of its consequences for destination and origin areas. However, what both paradigms have in common is a general inability to provide a meaningful understanding of human agency through their portrayal of migrants either as rather soulless individual utility-optimisers or as rather passive victims of global capitalist forces. This shows that neither functionalist nor historical-structural theories provide realistic accounts of migratory hubs. In view of the above contentions, Haas (2021) seems to be of the opinion that the central challenge in advancing migration theory is the elaboration of conceptual tools that improve humans’ ability to simultaneously account for structure and agency in understanding processes and experiences of migration, without abandoning the insights which both functionalist and historical structural paradigms offer. Premised on the above, this paper opines that some micro structural and historical factors accounted for the large migration issues in the central Niger Delta, as shall be discussed.

### **The Land and People of Central Niger Delta**

The Niger Delta is situated at the southern end of the River Niger. It stretches from the Mahin Creek to the Bight of Benin and from Apoi to Bakkassi. It covers about 75% of the entire coastline of Nigeria with half of the region’s topography crisscrossed with rivulets, creeks rivers and parchment of islands with others as uplands (Wangbu 2018). The average monthly temperature of the region is 27°C with an annual rainfall ranging from 300 to 4500 ml.

The natural habitat of Niger delta people is made up of mangrove, lowland rainforest, freshwater forest and aquatic ecosystem which mangrove is the most productive and complex ecosystem and of high socio-economic value to the local dwellers (Izah 2018). The region is rich in both aquatic and terrestrial biodiversity and serves as the main source of their survival as well as stabilizing the ecosystem against storms and even water level rise. It therefore serves as a natural means for mitigating adverse climatic change for the inhabitants

(Okonkwo 2015; Wangbu 2018). Be that as it may, there has been an increasing and seemingly unchecked attacks on this natural environment as a result of human related activities. The ecosystem is steadily depicted unrestraint owing to the mindless explorative and exploitative misfortunes that has ravaged the land because of the multi nationals and some indigenous entrepreneurs who have no concern for bio-diversity.

Premised on the above, it is held that Nigeria has one of the worst environmental records in the world (Butler, 2008) owing to “unconscionable profiteering at the detriment of human and nonhuman elements in the region” (Mbonu, 2014). The impacts are manifested widespread social and environmental problems ranging from oil spills, depiction of biodiversity, pollutions, urbanization, deforestation and so on. The combined effects of these and many other non-environmental features have resulted in a visible and alarming rate of degradation in the physical and bio-social environment, bringing sorrow and poverty to majority of the population. The direct consequence is that the inhabitation continues to struggle for survival by any means possible leading to migration.

The central Niger delta which this research covers, stretches between the Forcados and the Imo Rivers. In this regard, the states of Edo and Delta lie to the West while Cross River and Akwa Ibom are in the East. Hence, consists of the central section of coastal South-South Nigeria which includes Rivers and Bayelsa States by the original definition before the recent political creations (Obodoegbulam et al. 2019). The Central Niger Delta has the following indigenous groups, the Ogba, Egbema, Ndoni, Ikwerre, Kalagbari, Abua, Engenni, Andoni, Ogoni, Etche, Ekpeye and Ndoki in Rivers State. In Bayelsa some of the ethnic groups are: Brass, Nembe, Gbarain, Kolokuma, Opokuma, Ekpetiama, Apoi, Adodiana, Epie, Atisei, Zarama, Ekeremo, Bomo, Mein, Otiogidi and biseni among others. All these either collectively or in parts, trace their ancestry to the ancient Benin kingdom.

Religio-Cultural Migrations in the Central Niger Delta Issues of religio-cultural migration in the central Niger Delta revolves around certain factors. These are social inequality, economic deprivation, political marginalization, cultural annihilation, religious intimidation, internal strife and external aggression. All these either singly or collectively, contributed to incidence of religio-cultural migration, not only in the central Niger Delta but in many parts of the world.

The movement of people from one place to another, otherwise known as migration is as old as the history of humans. these movement are necessitated by

one factor or the other. People usually leave one community, region or country to their present abode for one reason or the other. Haralambos and Horlborn (2013) noted that “globalization”, differentiation, acceleration, feminization, politization and proliferation as trends to the phenomenology of migration. Referring the above assertion to the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, it is obvious that the different ethnic groups and nationalities that inhabit the region migrated from different countries or regions to their present location. In the Central Niger Delta, i.e., Rivers State for example, ethnic groups like Ekpeye, Abua, Ogba, and Engenni; claimed to have migrated from the Ancient Benin Kingdom. The Okirika and the Degema groups traced their origin to Ogbia/Engenni people.

In an analysis of the causal factors of migration, Haralambos and Horlborn (2013) maintained that migration of any mode will not take place without a cause. This section of the paper however is aimed at analysing the factors, otherwise known as push factors that necessitated this migration.

Religio-cultural subjugation: The origin of the Egbesu deity in Oporomor clan of Bayelsa State could be traced to the fear of cultural subjugation. Solomon (2021) holds that There are variations in the oral traditions and stories, surrounding the origin of Egbesu deity and the Oporomor Clan, however, the different narratives agree that Ekere the founder of Amabolou, the spiritual and political headquarters of the Oporomor Clan migrated from Oporoma which is the headquarters of the Southern Ijaw Local Government Area of Bayelsa State. Alagoa (2005) Opined that Ekeremor came from the central Delta town of Oporoma. He contends that, there was a fight between the section in which Ekeremor was the leader and another section name Angiama. Ekeremor’s people lost and fled the town. They settled at Oru-Ekeremor and eventually moved to Amabolou.

According to Amabiri (2022) Pasman Ebikeme documented by Madu Weky, asserted that Ekere migrated from Oporoma town in Southern Ijaw Local Government Area. Ekere was a beloved son of his father, who join his father in the worship of the family Egbesu deity. Following the death of Ekene’s father, the priesthood of the Egbesu family deity was given to Ekere to take care but his half-brothers were displeased and threatened to kill him. Ekere escaped and migrated first to Esabakiri and later moved to Tobufou (Egbemo-angalabiri market), from this place in the course of his fishing and hunting expedition he found the forest which is between Norgbene and Tamogbene. He later settled opposite the shrine of the deity for fear of wild animals and later founded the

present settlement of Amabolou because of the large expanse of cultivable land. From Amabolou other communities sprang up that today make up the Oporomor Clan. The implication of the above is that as humans migrate, deities equally do so.

It is factual that lack of tolerance of some cultural practices which create fear and threat of conflict can engineer migration. Enigheni (2018) affirmed that the forbearers of Abua Kingdom, Ogbia, Emeni and Obenya were uncomfortable with the ancestral veneration of where dwelling which demanded human heads for their annual sacrifice. According to her, these traditional religious activities coupled with geographical handicap and the search for a better means of sustenance and related factors made the Abua's progenitors migrate to the central Niger Delta.

According to a mythic narrative by the people of Soku, the mysterious disappearance of members of some communities in the locality, was a common event without a solution. The bodies of the missing members suspected to have drowned during fishing or killed by animals are not usually found. However, the escape of a kidnapped pregnant woman from *Opie-ama* community located within the area but married to an indigen of *Boko-ama* who stayed with these cannibals for over five months led to the invasion and conquest of the cave dwellers in about 11<sup>th</sup> century AD by the combined warriors of *Boko-ama* and *Opie-ama* people.

The *Opie-ama* and *Boko-ama* communities later relocated to the place owing to its security advantage. They were later joined by people from *Iriame* community, *Doki* community and *Amanana-ama* community to form the Soku Kingdom. In all, there were five waves of migration from the old shipping to Soku to form a federation of some sort.

The seven outlets of the cave later became the seven compounds of Soku. They are; *Bilaba Polo or Opupolo*, *Okurusibobroa polo*, *Abakala polo*, *Agame polo*, *Opudaba polo*, *Burunumgbo polo* and *Duminaya polo*.

The Soku people were very vast in indigenous warfare. The people were mainly of southern Ijaw stock but were later joined by some others from the northern/central Ijaw speaking people of Biseni, Akinima and Abua extraction for protection. (Alasia, 2016), "the kingdom flourished in warfare, Traditional

science and technology. As a result, fleeing family members from neighbouring communities come to the kingdom for refuge. Such people and communities were usually settled under oath and paid allegiance to the kingdom.

This is a state of conflict between different ethnic nationalities or groups within a country or region. War or strife as a physical push factor is a critical and front-line factor for the migration of various ethnic groups and nationality in the central Niger Delta. The Ogoni ethnic group for instance, is said to have migrated from the ancient Ghana (Ngbara, 2018). Lending credence to the above, an encyclopaedia source records that, it was as a result of civil war in Ghana at about 15 B.C.E. that caused the migration. The report maintained that the Ogonis are the first emigrant to the Central Niger Delta. The forbearers were led by a woman named Gbenekwaanwaa in the company of other warriors, spirit media, and medicine men via a canoe to their first settlement in Nama, the ancestral home of the Ogonis' in the present day Gokana local Government Area. Baribiina (2018), citing Anokari affirmed that Gbepkeewe was among the first emigrant from the old Ghana who later migrated to Giopko and settled them. In a nutshell, it was war and crises that occasioned the migration of the Ogoni ethnic nationality to the Niger Delta.

The Okirika people are another set of migrants who claimed that it was internal strife that pushed them to the eastern part of the central Niger Delta. In their history of migration, a Progenitor called Oko was said to be the first emigrant who paddled his canoe through a lone creek. (Opuoyuloya, 1975). According to Adox-Okujagu (2019), Oko did not leave his tribe, i.e., where he migrated from because of the thirst for fame, a discovery, but owing to incessant wars and crises in the neighbourhood clan of Kologuma, Tombo, Ipiakasa and Adeke now in Bayelsa State. The unabated crises led to further migration of two other people namely, Opoutibeya and Opuogoloya who later settled in the Island of Okirika.

The Orashi sub-region inhabitants of the Central Niger Delta Region are yet another group that were "pushed" by war and other related factors to their present abode in the central Niger Delta. This sub-region comprises of the Ekpeye, Ogba and Abua people. Solomon (2014) maintained that it was in a bit to escape the looming war and crises in the Ancient Benin Empire that led to the migration of a man called Akalaka who happens to be the father of Ekpeye, Ogba and Ihuroha at about 1442 A. D.



Solomon continued during the reign of Oba Awuarre, the then Oba of Benin, his atrocities were so severe that his subjects could no longer bear, hence, they planned to assassinate him. The plot was revealed to the Oba who instantly became very hostile to the people. According to him, this hostility resulted to a great exodus of people from Benin Empire for fear of being killed. Enyia, (2017) has it that it is during the crises that many tribes such as the Itsekiri, the Urhobo and others (including Akalaka the great warrior) left Benin for their new settlement. Akalaka who was one of the courageous palace chiefs who planned the insurrection fled to Agbo now in Delta State. While there in Agbo, Solomon continued, the Obi of Agbo planned to conscript the able men of the kingdom which include the children of Akalaka, and when he sensed it, he then migrated southwards through the River Niger and branched off the Orashi. The team finally settled at Olube, now Ula-Ubie. Kalaka, his three children and their progenitures, thereafter spread through the length and breadth of the forest between Orashi and Sombriero Rivers.

Obodoegbulam (2019) agrees to an extent with Enyia but differed in the fact that it was an intended transformation of the insignificant territory by the Oba Ewure (1449 -1473) that led to his increase of the amount of money paid as tax in the kingdom, and upon a courageous demand by Akalaka for the ruling Oba to explain the reason for the increased taxation that led to the hostility and eventual departure.

Obodoegbulam (2019) while discussing the effect of the internal strife which led to the disintegration of the original settlement of the progenitures of Akalaka the forebear of Ekpeya, Ogba and Ihruoha, holds that it was the crisis at Ahiahu not Ula-Ubiye between the sons of Ekpeye and Ogba which resulted to the death of one of the sons of Ekpeye that led to the separation of the three sons. Ekpeye migrated and settled at the South (Ula-Ubie), Ochichi moved to the East (Elele) and Ogbo moved to Umuogba and later to Obigwe.

**Economic Opportunity:** Economic opportunity is another push factor that necessitated movements to the Central Niger Delta. A clear case in point happened in the Bonny Kingdom. According to Wikipedia report, (2022), the Bonny Kingdom, otherwise known as Grand Bonny was founded by Okpara Ndoli, a man from the Igbo hinterland at about 1000 A.D. the then 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century slave trade was the major attraction of the founder Okpara Ndoi. After the abolition of the slave trade by the British Government in 1807, and the introduction of the legitimate trade palm produce became the major stock in

trade. Bonny was a major trading coastal city from the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Inhabitants of this coastal city, were originally known as the Ibani people and spoke Igban language. However, owing to the heavy influence of the slave trade and the plan to hide their indigenous language, gradually adopted the Ndoki dialect of Igbo language. While discussing the development of Port Harcourt as a commercial city, Tasié (2020) contended that commercialisation and industrialisation of the city largely accounted for the large population influx. In his submission, the development of Port Harcourt in 1912, as a port city, and the subsequent construction of the railway line from Enugu, attracted emigrants from different parts of the country, to work in the emerging city. This scenario was further exacerbated following the coming of shell B. P. who established their industrial and residential area in Ewo.

The same economic consideration influenced the founding of Rumuolumeni in Akpo district of Obio/Akpo Local Government Area of Rivers State. Evuzie (2018) held that Olumeni, the founder of the community came to the area in search of galls to harvest. Rumuolumeni people till the present, revere their progenitor as a strong man who carved a path for himself by abandoning his comfort to explore his environment. At the road junction close to Rumuolumeni town hall, his stature is visibly displayed with his climbing rope.

Tracing the ancestry of Udekama people of the present-day Degema in Rivers State, Kpe (2018, 2021), citing Solomon (2003) avows that Udekaama people originated from Benin kingdom, the forebears of the Udekaama left Benin and in their journey in the 11<sup>th</sup> century and temporarily settled at a place called ovreni in Ethiope Local Government Area of Delta state. From this location, they later moved to Agbassa-Ogbolomini Epe and from there to Tutubele in Akininia Engenne in the present Ahoada-West Local Government of Rivers State, before they finally settled on the Udekaama soil. Solomon (2003) noted that the movement of the people from Akanima, was as a result of sharing formula of the fish harvested from a common fishing lake. While the section of the people who migrated to the present Degema argued for equity, their relatives who stayed in Akanima insisted they must take a bigger share. In Degema language, the name Udekama means “tomorrow we share” This perhaps may have been the occurring term when the people argued on the sharing formula.

Poor living conditions, lack of economic opportunity, search for food and water security characterized the migration of Etche Ethnic Nationality into the Central Niger Delta. Two accounts emanate their origin. Achonwa (1980 cited by

Onyekwere (2016) opined that while one source has it that they migrated from amongst the earliest Igbos that moved to the different areas, another account maintained that Etche people migrated from Benin Kingdom. He further maintained that the people of Etche left Benin Kingdom about the 7<sup>th</sup> century to Aboh to the Orashi Rivers through Ndoni creek, settled briefly at present day Omoku, moved Eastward to Abua area, crossed to Abua to Ndele on and finally stopping and settling at Igbido which is the first Etche settlement. These movement and migration from one place to another was occasioned by perceived poor living condition, lack of economic opportunities, crop failure, and search for food and good source of water.

### **Recommendation**

In view of the discussion in this paper, the following recommendations will suffice.

1. The negative factors which force people to migrate from their traditional environment should be discouraged.
2. Migration issues in the developing countries should be given a closer attention, by development agencies.
3. Destination areas, regions or countries should develop a more friendly policies that will give the migrants a sense of belonging.
4. Development agencies should encourage migrants to return to their homeland after some period away.
5. Migration studies should be introduced in the school curriculum from primary to university levels.
6. The cultural attraction which influenced migration should be replicated in the migrants' original settlements.

### **Conclusion**

From all indication, it is crystal clear that movement into Niger Delta were occasioned by many factors. Ethnic wars, intolerance towards, certain cultural practices, available and lack of economic opportunities and their impacts are key factor that drive migration in the Niger Delta. All these, no doubt brought about different cultures and customs that dominated the pattern of migration character among the people. As people move, they moved along with their cultural norms, values and precepts. This submission shows that every instance of

migration is usually accompanied with not only the movement of the people but inclusive of the religious and cultural lifestyle

Relating the arguments above to the theoretical frame of this research, it is incontrovertible that there are areas of agreement and disagreement. Haas (2021) and his associates in the theory mainly concerned themselves with the migration which occurs between the developed and the developing world. This is against the position espoused in this study which focused on the push factors in the religio-cultural migration in the central Niger Delta, rather than the trend of migration. when there is the challenge for any people to leave their natural environment, the first consideration is usually what to do with their culture. This is because it is the totality of their existence. This perhaps explains why it is very difficult to annihilate the culture of any people no matter the excruciating condition at any given time in history. It is the position of this current study that any people that abandon their culture, equally abandoned their existence and continuity.

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