

## **CULTURAL MIGRATION AND SOCIAL EQUALIZATION IN THE CENTRAL NIGER DELTA OF NIGERIA: A CRITICAL APPRAISAL**

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### **Abstract**

*In all cultures, one of the basic characteristics of humans is the search for a greener pasture. Throughout history, migration remains a dominant feature or driving force towards achieving this desire. In the Central Niger Delta like other parts of the world, instances of migration and integration colour their history. From Kula to Khana, Opobo to Ndoni, stories abound of how the people move from one settlement to another. Here, political, economic, ecological and social religious explanation has been advanced to support such excises. The purpose of this paper is to trace the different histories of migrations of some cultures in the Central Niger Delta. The study will equally attempt 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. To facilitate this study, the research combined the historical and ethnographic method in the discussion. It concludes that migration is a continuous process in the history of man.*

## **Introduction**

In all cultures, one of the basic characteristics of humans is the search for a greener pasture. Whether as an emigrant or immigrant or a journey man on transit, the dignity of the individual is incontrovertible. Throughout history, migration remains a dominant feature or driving force towards achieving this desire. Thus, the right to self expression, association or participation and protection are fundamental.

Judging from history, it is evident that migration is a natural phenomenon. In corroboration, the United Nations holds that more people are now on the move than ever. 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.

According to 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.

The central Niger Delta, covers the stretch 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 Eastern part of the region.

Without mincing words, as people migrate, they take along with them their culture. Unfortunately, the fear of domination of the majority over the minority or threat of extermination from the very influential against the vulnerable, have made the agitation for social equalization very imperative. The purpose of this paper is to trace the different histories of migrations of some people in the Central Niger Delta. The study will equally attempt 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. To facilitate this study, the research combined the historical

and ethnological methods in the discussion. It concludes that human migration is a continuous process in the history of man.

### **The Concept Of Culture And Cultural Migration**

Throughout the world, human history is dotted with instances of migration to and fro the different geographical locations on the globe. Worldwide, cultural migration is a social phenomenon of which no society region, country or continent can claim to be completely insulated. Migration is a double edged sword. While it has helped to improve the living condition of some people, it has been a means of underdevelopment to others. In this regard, Rodney (2005) remarks, the slave trade was a basic factor of underdevelopment in Africa. He observed that this was made possible when Africans were shipped to other parts of the world and sold as commodities to work for the slave masters as their property.

Humans migrate with the totality of their person; their body, soul and spirit. In essence, they migrate with their culture (s). Culture and migration can therefore be said to be synonymous and inseparable in this sense. Culture for many represents a totality of a people's way of life. It is indeed a complex whole of man's acquisitions of knowledge, morals, beliefs, art, custom, technology and many more which are shared and transmitted from one generation to another (Oтите and Ogoinwo 2006). Culture therefore is all that is socially learned and shared by members of a society. The concept of culture is used in reference to a group or society and as such differs according to societies and their worldviews.

Okafor and Emeka (2012) quoting UNESCO publication on the definition of culture, contend "as the awareness possessed by a community of its own historical evolution by reference of which it tends to exact the continuity of its own being and to ensure its own development". Similarly, Nigeria's cultural policy 1988, defines culture as the totality of the way of life evolved by a people, in their attempt to meet the challenges of their environment. Giving order and meaning to their social, political, economic, aesthetic and religious norms and modes of organization".

There are material and non-material aspects of culture. Material culture is the explicit side of culture as it relates to the tangible acquisition of man in society. Non-material aspects of culture are not visible or tangible but are manifested through thinking and behavior of a people. These aspects of culture; material and non-material go together as the culture of a people. They are however

important in the analysis of cultural patterns of a people. Because of this, it is possible to predict or anticipate the behaviour of members of a given culture. Hence, in the event of migration, people move with the totality of their cultural heritage which can affect their new society significantly or otherwise depending on the proportion of the migrating group vis-à-vis the receiving society.

It is inherent in humans like most animals to move from place to place. Early humans were nomadic who move from one location to another in search of food, shelter and security. Till this day, humans still move for different reasons, which includes among others; economic, socio-cultural, religious, political and environmental (as earlier noted).

Migration is a process which is part of the very essence of humans since the beginning of civilization. It is a dynamic and complex phenomenon that transcends societies, cultures and races. It is a phenomenon that has continued to impact and contribute to the transformation of the entire facets of various societies thereby changing the racial, ethnic, linguistic, political and socio-cultural composition of their population and social existence (Adeola and Ogirai: 2010 Marshall, 2000). Migration impacts on both the place left behind, and on the place where migrants settle.

Migration can be classified in a number of ways which includes; the reasons for the migration, the social class and education of the migrating people, the duration of relocation and the geographical distribution of the resettlement. Further, Migrations can be voluntary or involuntary. When migrants change their location in search of better living conditions out of their free volition it is accounted as voluntary, whereas refugees are deemed to change their location involuntarily because they are forced by circumstances beyond their control (Berry 2001). Scholars observed three stages of migration viz: pre-migration, physical relocation, post migration.

There are two notable causes to migration of people; the push and pull factors. The push factors are the reasons behind the movement of people. This is usually as result of their own experience of life in one place which gives them reasons to move away. More often than not these are negative factor such as joblessness, droughts, flooding, war, poor education opportunities and poor amenities. Pull factors, on the other hand, are the expectations which attract people to the new place.

In sub-Saharan Africa, migration is an age old tradition. Adeola and Oluyemi (2010) observe this among the Yoruba, the Hausa/Fulani, the Ikwerre, Ijaw, Ibibio, Efik, and the Igbo of Nigeria. They conclude that migration still continues till date.

Migration sometimes, results in negative consequences. For instance, while trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea illegally to Europe, most migrants die on the sea. Adeniyi (2017) has it that on 17<sup>th</sup> November, 2017, a total number of 26 women from sub/Saharan Africa were buried in southern Italy. At their funeral, the officiating priest remarked. "The deceased women and girls as well as two creations of nature, died in pursuit of a better life. They were searching for freedom but found death".

### **Cultures And Migration Narratives In The Central Niger Delta**

The Central Niger Delta states viz Rivers State and Bayelsa are homes to many immigrants before the eve of the colonial incursion and the subsequent amalgamation of the entity today called Nigeria. The searches for arable land for agriculture, trade and employment remain a major pull factor for movement of people to the region because of its rich natural endowments. The timing predates the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, and trade in palm oil and palm kernel.

#### **Degema History**

Oral tradition has it that Udekama - Degema people migrated from Benin. The forebears of the Udekama left Benin (in what is now known as Edo State of Nigeria) and in their journey in the 11<sup>th</sup> century temporarily settled at a place called 'Ovreni' in Ethiope Local Government Area of Delta State and later moved to Agbassa, Ogbolomini (Epie), Ewu and Ututubele in Akinima Egenni in the present Ahoada-West Local Government Area of Rivers state before they finally settled down on the uninhabited Island of Udekama-Degema around the 15<sup>th</sup> century known as Upokuma, now known as doctor's farm and later entered into the virgin land through the creek known as Utie-Atala (Solomon 2003)

Iwo (1991) asserts that there were little known facts about those who made these journeys in the distant land and the purpose of their migration. However, there were family heads (Udede Afain) like 'Ekeze', 'Ekebe', 'Oduma 'Obaa', 'Peika' and 'Tengele' among others which today forms the families in Udekama. Oral Tradition has it that these people left the ancient Benin Empire during the unpopular reign of King Awure the great and migrated through the Delta hinter

land across places as Ewu, Abassa, Ogboloma, Epie and Egenni. Ututubele-Egenni now Ahoada West Local Government Area was the settlement of the people of Udekama before the team finally left after a fish pond dispute and settled in their present home of Udekama-Degema.

The Udekama-Degema people do not have written documents of cultures they migrated with from their previous settlements but the cultural practices of the people showcases some traces of inherited or borrowed cultures mostly from their ancestral home Benin and probably other cultures around them as will be seen below.

### **The Supreme And Ancestral Veneration**

According to (Iwo 1991), the Udekama-Degema people are deeply religious and this is manifested in almost every facet of their social life before the advent of Christianity. The Degema people revere the Supreme Being known as "Oswo-Atala" (the god of the land) which is also known as "Osano bua" or "Osa" in Benin. Apart from the recognition of the Supreme Being, the people also recognize deities and venerate the ancestors which play a vital role in enforcing the moral codes of the society. In line with the Edo people believe that ancestors maintained an unbroken relationship with the family units and serve as spiritual family heads (Peavy 2013) which is in line with the Degema people. Thus the Degema people provides place called "Uto Osu" or "Adu Edim" for the ancestors where the living dead are been venerated accordingly.

**Festivals and Masquerades:** - The people of Degema are known for rich tradition of festivals and masquerades through which the people either appease the various gods and goddesses, initiates men and women into age grades or as a traditional get together. The festivals and masquerades include Ogboivitam, Iziba, Idu, Igugule, Iwu Ogini, Amungbo (fattering) and 'Awe'(wrestling) for instance while the Edo people celebrate Ukpe festival in June, the festival to mark the end of one year and the beginning of another year, the Degema people celebrate "Ekein Kpom" which serve the same purpose as that of the Edo.

Other areas of cultural migration among the Degema people are in practice of rites of passage mostly burial rites and rites of womanhood. The Degema people sees burial rites as a communal affairs therefore the dead and burial of a person requires everyone participation.

### **The Khana/Ghana Origin Of Hypothesis**

Among the Ogoni, there are many speculations concerning their history of origin. Generally, this hypothesis is based on the Khana oral tradition of their elders that they arrived from the West of Africa in Canoes at a time of crises. The exact geographical area in the West of Africa from which the Khana people are believed to have migrated is hitherto controversial. However, the oral tradition holds that close to the shore where the canoe was to berth It capsized, and the people that survived the accident settled at their River side community of Namma and Kugba; from these initial settlements, subsequent migrations took them to Gure, then Sii Kwara and Luawii, all of which are very close to the ancestral sites (Nwideede, oral interview, June 2018).

According to this hypothesis, the Ogoni people came from the old Sudanese Empire of Ghana which was said to have collapsed in 1240 AD: And that the name Khana, which appears the oldest of all the Ogoni groups, was a corrupt form of the name Ghana from which they came. They further maintained that Khana and other existing peoples who claim ancient Ghana Origin share common names and household words with identical meanings. As it were the Old Ghana Empire occupied the territorial areas of present-day Mauritania, Mali and Senegal and was largely inhabited by Mende-speaking peoples, and the Sonnike.

The evidence of Ghana origin can easily be further found in the type of major crops cultivated by the Khana people. The costal tribes of Ghana who were the principal agents of slave trade have a style of planting their yams which is distinct from that of the Ashantis of the Ghanaian hinterland. After clearing the bush, they first dig holes of about one foot at regular distances, the soil, dug out, is later put back into the hole before the piece of yam is put in the replaced soil. Thereafter a small mould is built over the yam. This is exactly the same style of planting adopted by the Khana. A further evidence is in the type of crops cultivated namely Kolanut trees, yam.

According to Obodoegbulam (2019), Ellah (1995) Oguzor (2007) Ogba, Ekpeye and some communities in Northern Ikwerre, have a common ancestry. Other tribes that trace their origin to the Benin are the Oguta and Onitsha. These cultures are believed to have migrated from the Benin Empire, during the reign of Oba Eware in the fourteenth century. This was to escape the obnoxious regime of the Oba.

These people share a lot in common with the Benin culture. Some of the cultural practices among the Ogba, Ekpeye, Oguta and the people of Onitsha is the building of their houses in clusters or compounds. Ellah (1995) notes that this is typical of the ancient Benin culture. Again, Ellah (1995) quoting the Eze Ekpeye Logbo (Robinson O. Robinson) asserts that when an Ekpeye woman of high standing dies, the ritual of *Uma Ogbani* will be called up in her honour. This ritual which involves the ceremonial feeding of the deceased by her relatives is similar to what obtains among the traditional Benin people till date.

In another respect, the age grade custom in Ogba, Ekpeye and the Ikwerre is a replica of what obtains in the Benin tradition as Otu. The implication of these practices is that the people, have a common history of migration.

In another respect the Ikwerre people also have an impressive account of migration impact in their culture. In this regard, are the Aro's and the Hausa's who infiltrated Ikwerre land in search of greener pasture. Here the Aro's came and developed regular and organized trade routes. The leaders of these troupes established elaborate networks of trading friends, allies and kinsmen and permanent settlements in different parts of the region which enhanced their trading activities. Their association with the Aro oracle, *Ibinukpabi* was a major factor for their success. Apart from trade, most Aro settlers came as emissaries of the Oracle; the long juju of Aro.

In Ikwerre, Agumagu (1988) cited in Chinda (2017) notes that the migration of Aro people were in phases; the first being the slave trade era which spanned up to the establishment of British administration 1700 to 1900 According to this account, the early Aro came through Ozuzu in Etche to settle in Igwuruta, Omagwa, Isiokpo, Elele, Rumuekpe, Ubima, and Aluu.

According to Agumagu (1988) the Igbo-Aro (Aru) commanded much influence on their host owing to the influence of their most dreaded long juju. They occupied positions of authorities during the colonial era. For instance, Nwocha Amefula and Osundu Oyo, both Aros in Isiokpo, were appointed Warrant Chiefs in Isiokpo to represent Omagwa, Ozuaha, Omademe and Ipo at Choba for seven years. In another respect, Amakiri Nwocha, a member of Customary Court of Appeal in Omagwa, Nwosu Okorie Ebika, (village Counsellor) a tax agent and a rate collector. They generally participated in the customary administration. In

Omudioga, Aluu and Omagwa, the Aro formed the bulk of the administrative personnel there. They wielded considerable influence on the communities

The Aro (Igbo) were generally feared and even respected mainly because of their oracle-*Ibiniukpabi*, perceived to have supernatural power. The oracle was regarded as impartial and unchallengeable. This accounts for its fame and popularity in Igboland and even beyond. The activities of the Aro oracle – made the Aro move about into the hinterland uninterrupted. Ofonagoro (1979) asserts that the Aro, being the custodian of this oracle, moved about to different places with immunity from local molestation. According to Akani (2009), the influence of their oracle, exerted some influence in Ikwerre local affairs. Wealthy Ikwerre people were usually singled out by the Aros through the instrumentality of their long juju, as witches and wizards and the accused persons were condemned to death and/or sold into slavery. Their possession would be confiscated under the pretence that the possession belonged to the oracle. The Aros acquired much wealth that they owned land and landed property among the Ikwerre people.

The Aros spheres of influence went beyond Ikwerre tribe. In a narrative of the Aro incursion of Ogbaland which threatened their religious sovereignty in the pristine era, Obodoegbulam (2019) notes that this immigrants who hitherto were engaged in trade in the flourishing human cargo migrated along with them their pantheon “IBINAOKPOBIA”, a deity they held with great awe and prided as superior to other deities. According to him this deity which was believed as capable of giving justice against all odds was fast integrated into the Ogba religious pantheon even at the risk of abandoning their ancestral deities.

The Aros were not the only Igbos that related with Ikwerre people in terms of their pantheons and trade. The Igbo messengers from Igwekala (Omunoha) shrine and medicine men from Awka who combined being agents of the oracle with gold smiting and other businesses were greatly patronized. There were others like the Nkwerre people who also were engaged in blacksmith and also traded in textiles. On the whole a good proportion of the Igbo immigrants were engaged in farming as they flocked regularly into Ikwerreland to work on the farms during the farming seasons. Part of their engagements was palm fruit cutting, oil extraction for cooking and cash crops harvesting. This according to Chinda (2017) might be the reason why some Ikwerre men were engaged in marriages with women from Igboland.

In churches and schools around many parts of the Central Niger Delta especially the Rivers State, the Igbo language was the lingua franca and this, to a great extent, commanded a great influence on the culture and language of the people. The Ikwerre, Ogba, Ekpeye, Eleme, Okirika, Opobo, Bonny to mention but a few were the victims of this aberration of the domineering influence of the majority tribe. In Ikwerreland, Gbule (2016) notes, that most of those who served as Catechist were the Saros, Ijaws and Igbos who were foreign to the area and has neither good understanding of the indigenous categories and its interpretative schema. The use of the indigenous language for catechism, songs, reading and interpreting the bible or sermons for liturgy were greatly discouraged. Only the Igbo Union Bible was the officially approved even when unintelligible to the indigenous people. As a consequence, the catechist even when indigenous was expected to learn by rote memory the Igbo Orthography. The contrary was punishable as in the case of St. Barnabas Anglican Church, Elekahia where an Ikwerre Catechist was suspended by a missionary teacher for preaching in the indigenous language (Onu 1997 cited in Gbule 2016). In the same vein, Dagogo Alagoma a native of Bonny Island whose indigenous language is Igbani acted as a consultant to Dr R. C. Abraham in his study of the Igbo. He was able to speak the Standard Igbo because of its usage in churches and schools even though he is Igbani by birth and up brining. (Williamson 1992 cited in Nduka 2003). In any case, the Union Bible which was variously described as an artificial construct and "heavy-footed Esperanto" was not only disastrous to the early emergence and development of the indigenous languages of most parts of the central delta, but smacks off some form of cultural superiority and irredentism. This unfortunate scenario of disrespect for a peoples sensibilities and identity exist in some parts of Rivers State even till date where the Igbos are either the Choir Masters, Catechist, Pastors or Priest in-charge.

This for instance this accounted for the changes in the ancestral names of Ikwerre clans and communities to being modified into Igbo language. Thus community names like Igirita, Ogwa Umanelu, Ubimma, Alua, Unueme, Umuokoro, Umuomasi, and others are corruptions of the original Ikwerre names as Igwuruta, Omagwa, Aluu, Omerelu, Ubima, Rumueme, Rumuokoro, Rumuomasi, respectively (Aguma 2014 cited in Chinda 2017).

The Hausas (Osukpa) were also among the many immigrants to the Central Delta. Their migrations and settlements as hunters and traders dates back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century especially in the Ikwerre area of the Delta. A case in hand is the Hausa settlement in Elele community. The Hausas were reported to have come

on the invitation of the people of Elele in the later part of the nineteenth century to help and hunt for the elephants that constituted a menace to their farmland. They successfully eliminated the elephants which brought a sigh of relief and endeared them to the indigenes (Amadi, 1984; Woke, 1993 cited in Chinda 2017). They traded also in ivory which at the time was a flourishing business at the European market.

On arrival, the Hausa elephant hunters/killers settled at Omuachi compound of Mbuguanyim village, an area which is now called Mgbu Osukpa. The Hausa in Elele settled under the leadership of Mallam Dadi who became the first Sarki of their settlement. He was called Eze Wosukpa by the indigenes.

### **An Overview Of Social Equalization In The Central Niger Delta**

The above scenario pictures a situation where people of diverse backgrounds make their way in and out of the central Niger delta at different times in history: this was purely in search of a greener pasture. Like every other case of human migration, two main reasons account for this; the pull and push factors. Ordinarily, no individual or group would like to continue to stay or inhabit a place where his interest is not protected. Therefore, at any point in time it is realized, such an individual or group will be tempted to leave in search of a more conducive environment.

As a people move, they will join another group in their new home. Here, the migrating group will expect their host to see them as humans with pride and dignity. They will expect their dignity and self worth be recognized and respected. This is as much that the in-coming culture will do likewise to their host.

Without over stating the obvious, the self worth, pride, dignity and a sense of respect are very important factors in issues of social equalization. The above assertion suggests that every culture has a sort of pride and dignity. In this way, it is apparent that every culture whether as an emigrant or immigrant has something to contribute towards the development of their new society. On this premise, it is incumbent on every culture to treat other s with a sense of dignity.

### **Recommendations**

In view of the enormous challenges presented by the issues of cultural migration, this paper makes the following recommendations:

- (i) New opportunities should be created for every culture to sustain itself.
- (ii) The developed countries should as a matter of necessity introduce a system where more development projects will be sighted in the less developed countries.
- (iii) To discourage migration, the western countries should discourage money laundering by some political leaders in the less developed countries. ]
- (iv) Governments at all levels should Endeavour to foster good governance in their respective domains. As this will discourage people from leaving their natural habitat to an unknown destination.
- (v) The majority tribes should avoid the temptation of over running minority groups to encourage a life of live-and let live.
- (vi) Conflicts at all levels should be discouraged so that people will be encouraged to stay back in their natural habitat.
- (vii) International organizations should step up their reconciliatory mechanisms to assure intending migrants of their safety and security.

## **Conclusion**

While it may be probable that some people migrate on their own volition, others are forced to leave their habitat against their wish. In this regard, it is a moral obligation on humanity to protect the interest of the weak and the vulnerable in the society. According to social anthropologists organisms do better in their natural environment. Therefore, any action knowingly or unknowingly, which is capable of forcing any individual, group or society out of their natural residence, should be avoided. Similarly, any action which will inflict pain or injury on a vulnerable or less advantaged group should equally be avoided.

So long as obvious signs of social, economic, political, ecological and religious inequality continue to exist, migration will continue to stare humanity in the face. Unfortunately, this will get to a point where those nations and societies who feel comfortable now, will begin to witness such instances which warranted

the earlier cases of migration. On this premise, while these obvious inequalities persist, migration will continue to be a global phenomenon.

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