

## MIGRATION AND IGBO CULTURAL IDENTITY: AN EVALUATION

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### **Abstract**

*Culture is simply understood as a way of life of a people. As a people, the Igbo have a culture that is peculiar to them. This is what can be referred to as Igbo cultural identity. However, experience has shown that Igbo cultural identity has seriously been threatened because of migration activities. The pertinent question now is: How can Igbo people maintain their cultural identity in the face of myriads of challenges posed by migration? Employing the philosophical methods of phenomenology and critical analysis, this study observes that migration has dealt a very dead blow on the cherished cultural identity of Igbo people. It therefore submits that every people have cultural identity and when there is a complete loss of identity of a particular people, it speaks nothing but doom. The paper calls on all Igbo scholars, traditional rulers and leaders, public servants of Igbo extraction and all people of good will to help to revitalize the Igbo cultural identity. Finally, it calls for Igbo Cultural Renaissance as a way of reviving Igbo cultural identity that is at the verge of extinction.*

**Keywords:** Migration - Igbo - Culture - Identity - Cultural relativism

### **Introduction**

There is no human society that is devoid of a particular way of life. This particular way of life distinguishes a group of people from among other cultures that spice the world of man. Every culture is good in itself and identical to itself. The culture of a people forms the fulcrum of their identity. Igbo people have a culture that identifies them as a tribe among several tribes of the world. Experience has shown that one of the many ways a particular culture loses its originality and continuity is through migration. When a particular culture allows itself to be contaminated by other cultures, it stands the great chance of losing its pristine identity and originality. The rate at which Igbo Cultural Identity has been watered down by the importation of other cultures is very alarming, such that its existence in the nearest future is very much uncertain. The speed at which people who travelled and experienced other cultures and come back to incorporate it into Igbo original cultural identity has succeeded in putting some Igbo great thinkers into a deep reflective mood. This work, therefore, is an attempt to look at the effects of migration on Igbo Cultural Identity.

### **What is migration?**

The word migration came from a Latin word *migrare*, which means to change one's residence. Migration has myriads of definitions by different scholars. Concepts and approaches are very fundamental aspects of any study as the entire concept of a subject solely depend on its concepts and approaches. A concept is an idea of a particular theme while approach is the way of dealing with the concept. Both are very essential as they set a new direction in the study of any given subject of inquiry. Each scholar tries to define migration distinctly based on his or her approach to it. The geographers lay emphasis on the time and space significance of mobility; sociologists have laid stress on social consequences of mobility whereas importance to economic aspect of migration has been given by the economists. Literal meaning of Migration is shifting of people or an individual or group of individuals from one cultural area to another, which may be permanent or temporary. According Dinesh Bhugra and Matthew Becker "Migration can be defined as the process of going from one country, region or place of residence to settle in another"<sup>1</sup>. The duration of this new settlement varies, but the central focus is on those who move either semi-permanent or permanently to another geographical region. It is defined as an act of moving from one area to another in search of work<sup>2</sup>. Many people's view on the word migration can be a simple shift in the physical space. But it would be worthy to note that the meaning of migration is changing simultaneously with the passage of time. Migration can be defined as the process of going from one country, region or place of residence to settle in another.<sup>3</sup> Human migration is the movement of people from one place to another with the intentions of settling, permanently or temporarily at a new location.<sup>4</sup> According to International Encyclopedia of social sciences view on migration:

Migration is a difficult concept to define because it includes people who move for different reasons across different spaces. A migrant can be a person who moves to another city or town within a nation; a refugee who crosses an international border to escape religious or political persecution; a jobseeker who moves to another country for better economic opportunities; a slave who is forcibly moved; or a person displaced by war or natural disaster. Demographers lack a single, operational definition for migration because it occurs under different conditions<sup>5</sup>

Migration is also understood as the "movement of people out of a country of origin or movement of people into a new country." <sup>6</sup> This type of movement

can be referred to as either emigration or immigration. Migration is viewed as a form of individual or a group adaptation to perceived changes in environment. People may migrate as individuals, in family units or in large groups. There are multiple reasons why people embark on migration. People migrate for economic reason, social reason, climatic reason, educational reason, financial reason, religion reason, etc. However, it has been observed that the basic cause of migration is the search for food.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, having taken a brief look at the concept of migration, the next subtopic shall focus on Cultural identity.

### **Cultural Identity**

A better grasp of the two concepts – Culture and identity – will help to a greater extent in understanding what the concept cultural identity means. Culture is basically defined as a way of life of a particular set of people living in a particular geographical location. In the words of Joannes Asikaogu,

A culture consists of habits that are shared by members of a particular society, whether it is a primitive tribe or a civilized nation. The habits that are shared in a society fall into two major headings i.e. termed as customs and collective ideas respectively. Modes of behavior such as etiquettes and the techniques of manipulating material objects are included in customs. On the other hand, practical knowledge, religious beliefs and social values comes under category of collective ideas. Similarly, acculturation is a process of change in custom resulting from the contact of people of different cultural backgrounds. An individual may like to change his pattern of behavior and activities.<sup>8</sup>

Culture is learned and passed through generations and includes the totality of beliefs and value system of a particular tribe. Culture has been described as peculiarities that are shared and bind people living together as a community. Battista Mondin points that “culture signifies the totality of customs, techniques and values that distinguish a social group, a tribe, a people, a nation”<sup>9</sup>

On the other hand, identity is the totality of one's perception of self, or how we as individuals view ourselves as distinct from others. Bhugra noted that: "racial, cultural and ethnic identities form part of one's identity, and identity will change with development at a personal as well as at a social level along with migration and acculturation"<sup>10</sup>. Therefore, Cultural Identity is the

peculiarity found in any given culture that makes it stand out in the midst of other cultures. Cultural identity can also be said to be the identity of a group or culture or of an individual as far as one is influenced by one's belonging to a group or culture. According to Vivian Hsueh-Hua "Cultural identity refers to identification with, or sense of belonging to a particular group based on various cultural categories, including nationality, ethnicity, race, gender, and religion" <sup>11</sup>. Myron Lustig noted that "cultural identities are central to a person's sense of self."<sup>12</sup> For him, this is because cultural identities "are central, dynamic, and multifaceted components of one's self concept". Other researchers describe cultural identity as referring to the content of values as guiding principles, to meaningful symbols, and to life styles that individuals share with others, though not necessarily within recognizable groups.<sup>13</sup> Cultural Identity of a particular society stems from individual beliefs and value of life. Just as ethics stems from morality, so also is what we have as cultural identity of a tribe stems from individual members of that society.

Cultural Identity of any given society (Igbo) is constructed and maintained through the process of sharing collective knowledge such as traditions, heritage, language, aesthetics, norms and customs. As individuals typically affiliate with more than one cultural group, cultural identity becomes complex and multifaceted. While formerly, scholars assumed identification with cultural groups to be obvious and stable, today most view it as contextual and dependent upon temporal and spatial changes. In the globalized world with increasing intercultural encounters and interaction, cultural identity is constantly enacted, negotiated, maintained, and challenged through communicative practices.

### **The Igbo Cultural Identity**

Igbo Cultural Identity is the sum total of customs, practices, traditions and values of the Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria. The uniqueness of the Igbo is enshrined in their way of life. This uniqueness cuts across their archaic and pristine practices as well as new concepts added into the Igbo culture either by continuous cultural evolution or by outside influence, for example migration. E. J. O. Ndubisi argued that "culture gives people identity. A person can easily be known by the particular culture he or she exhibits."<sup>14</sup> It is the way of life of a people that gives them identity as a people. In this regard, we can talk of Igbo cultural identity. The cultural identity of Igbo people is manifested in their customs and traditions, namely, visual art, music and dance forms, religious worship, attire, cuisine and language dialects, food, among several others. Igbo as a tribe has a very wonderful and notable cultural identity that is as old and ancient as the Igbo world. The Igbo,

through their cultural identity show how they perceive and explain their world, or the ways things are or change in their environment. In other words, there is no clear-cut difference between a tribe's cultural identity and their world view. According to Kalu, a worldview can be understood in terms of a unified picture of the cosmos explained by a system of concepts, which order the natural and social rhythms, and the place of individuals and communities..."<sup>15</sup> It can also be seen as a cosmological framework that refers to the Igbo way of organizing their activities which explain the how and why of daily experiences. In sum, the Igbo cultural identity buttresses the basic assumptions about, and perceptions of the universe, which give orientation and value to Igbo existential life.

### **Manifest Igbo Cultural Identity**

The Igbo cultural identity is made manifest in various ways as briefly discussed below:

**Attire:** Traditionally speaking, the attire of the Igbo generally consisted of little clothing, as the purpose of clothing originally was simply to cover private parts. Because of this purpose, children were often nude from birth until the beginning of their adolescence – the time they were considered to have self-consciousness. *Uli*, body art was used to decorate both men and women in the form of lines forming patterns and shapes on the body. Men wear contemporary *Isiagu* with the ceremonial Igbo men's hat *okpu agu*. Women traditionally carry their babies on their backs with a strip of clothing binding the two with a knot at her chest, a practice used by many ethnic groups across the continent of Africa. This method has been modernized in the form of the child's carrier. Maidens usually wore a short wrapper with beads around their waist and other ornaments such as necklaces and beads. Both men and women wore wrappers. Men would wear loin cloths that wrapped round their waist and between their legs to be fastened at their back, the type of clothing appropriate for the intense heat as well as jobs such as farming.

The Igbo principal luxury is in perfumes; one sort of these is an odoriferous wood of delicious fragrance: the other a kind of earth; a small portion of which thrown into the fire diffuses a most powerful odor. They beat this wood into powder, and mix it with palm oil; with which both men and women perfume themselves. As colonialism became more prevalent, the Igbo adapted their dress customs. Clothing worn before colonialism became "traditional" and worn on cultural occasions

### **Performing art/Igbo music**

The Igbo people have a musical style into which they incorporate various percussion instruments: the *udu*, which is essentially designed from a clay jug; an *ekwe*, which is formed from a hollowed log; and the *ogene*, a hand bell designed from forged iron. Other instruments include *opi*, a wind instrument similar to the flute, *igba*, *ichaka* etc. A widely popular musical genre in West Africa, Highlife is a fusion of jazz and traditional music. The modern Igbo highlife is seen in the works of Dr Sir Warrior, Oliver De Coque, Bright Chimezie and Chief Osita Osadebe, who were among the most popular Igbo highlife musicians of the 20th century.

Masking is one of the most common art styles in Igboland and is linked strongly with Igbo traditional music. A mask can be made of wood or fabric, along with other materials including iron and vegetation. Masks have a variety of uses, mainly in social attires, religious rituals, secret society initiations (such as the Ekpe society) and public festivals, which now include Christmas celebrations. Some of the best known include the *Agbogho Mmuo* (Igbo: Maiden spirit) masks of the Northern Igbo which represent the spirits of deceased maidens and their mothers with masks symbolizing beauty and *Ijele*. The *ijele* mask is also one of the impressive Northern Igbo mask. At 12 feet (3.7 m) high, *Ijele* masks consist of platforms 6 feet (1.8 m) in diameter, supporting figures made of colored cloth and representing everyday scenes with objects such as leopards

There are many Igbo dance styles, but perhaps, Igbo dance is best known for its *Atilogwu* dance troops. These performances include acrobatic stunts such as high kicks and cartwheels, with each rhythm from the indigenous instruments indicating a movement to the dancer. The Enugu people have their own style peculiar to them, Anambra, Owerri, Ebonyi and Abia people also have theirs.

### **Igbo Language**

"Language", as observed by E. J. O. Ndubisi, "is a mark of cultural identity ... Language brings out the thought-pattern and way of life of a people."<sup>16</sup> Language is the benchmark of every tribe. Language is a means of expressing an idea. Igbo language is a core cultural identity of the Igbo. Research has shown that Igbo language is difficult because of the huge number of dialects, its richness in prefixes and suffixes and its heavy intonation. Igbo is a tonal language and there are hundreds of different Igbo dialects. Apart from the different dialects, there is also the existence of central Igbo which is also known as '*Igbo izugbe*'.

### **Kola nut**

This is one of the sacred Igbo traditional fruits. This is as a result of its symbolic meaning and usage in the Igbo traditional culture. *Oji* occupies a unique position in the heart of the cultural life of Igbo people. *Oji* is the first thing served to any visitor in an Igbo home. It is a sign of hearty welcome. *Oji* is served before an important function begins, be it meeting, marriage ceremony, settlement of family disputes or entering into any type of agreement etc. *Oji* is traditionally broken into pieces by hand. According to Igbo people, *Oji* only understands Igbo language and that is why its language for blessing is Igbo and it has an Igbo conventional format for blessing, breaking and sharing.

### **Religion**

Before the coming of the uninvited missionaries, the Igbo people had already a concept of religion. Igbo traditional religion is the religion of the Igbo people. The Igbo have their traditional and unique way of approaching their *Chukwu*, divinities and ancestors and deities and this is solely part of their cultural identity. Igbo people, just like most African people, are “notoriously religious”.<sup>17</sup> The religious identity of Igbo people is made manifest in burials, Marriage, naming ceremony, farming, food etc. The above and many more constitute Igbo cultural identity.

### **Effects Of Migration On Igbo Cultural Identity**

By nature, no man exists as an island to himself; man is a being in relation with others. From the existentialist’s point of view, to be is to be with others. It is a fact that no tribe exists as an island to itself. Through interaction of people from different cultures, they share their cultural identities and this is called acculturation. Migration is one of the ways in which a particular culture gets in touch with other cultures. It has been a common view among some Igbo scholars that migration is now exerting its negative dominance on the core cultural identity of the Igbo. No one can totally deny the enrichment of Igbo culture that can be attributed to migration. Transfer of culture and acculturation has been seen in history a lot, as history is full of migration. People not only move into a new place but they also bring with them their own culture and try to maintain the same in their new environment and influence their new environment. And in this whole process, the culture of the place of destination starts experiencing a gradual change. These changes can be observed in different elements of culture such as customs, manners, dress, language, values, etc. The point of emphasis here, is that the rate migration affects Igbo cultural identity inherited from ancestors, puts its future existence on the verge of going into extinction or loss of identity.

Igbo culture and worldview have continued to be affected or suffer the forces of migration. Man's behavior and the way of carrying his day to day activities should speak and represent his cultural identity background. Outlined below are some of the effects of migration on Igbo cultural identity are:

**Lack of people to handover:** Cultural traditions and values are handed over from one generation to the another. Migration decreases the population of the migrant's place of origin and increases the population of his/her new settlement. When the youths who are the future custodian of the Igbo Cultural tradition and norms which form part of the Igbo identity are migrants in another settlement, who will take the mantle from the elders? The 'efulefu's' (the nincompoops) cannot properly hold and maintain what is given to their generation and therefore have nothing to pass onto the next generation. By this, the core cultural identity begins to fade away.

#### **Mutation of Igbo cultural festivals**

Obviously, it is not all Igbo cultural festivals that have varnished. Those that are still present have been diluted with the influence of migration. According to Luke Amadi and James E. Agena,

The core festivals that ought to have served as unifying factor and vehicle for transmission of knowledge like the days of our fathers such as wrestling matches, folklores are dead. In its place is European Premier League (EPL). An average Igbo boy, even girls are fans of one or more European club sides. Such addiction has grown deeper".<sup>18</sup>

In the words of Chief Levi Chikere as quoted in Luke Amadi and James E. Agena, " Few Igbo festivals are strong and alive such as new yam festival- iri ji Mbaise (Mbaise Yam festival) while Ofala remains strong in Anambra state as it involves the Igwe (Traditional ruler)".<sup>19</sup> Presently what exists predominantly in most Igbo communities are "events" not cultural festivals".<sup>20</sup>

Chief Dikeora Obieke in an interview as quoted on Amadi and Agena remarked:

The relegation of great festivals such as Aju festival in Obibiezena near Owerri, Imo State, Odo in parts of Ehaamufu Enugu, State, Nkwa Umuagbohoo (maidens dance) in Afikpo, Ebonyi State, Nwa-okorobo dance in Ikeduru in Imo State, Nwa-alija, Ojionu, Ekpe, Okonko

Atilogwu, Agaba, Odogwu, Adamma masquerades etc are evidences of culture loss".<sup>21</sup>

It is now beyond every reasonable doubt that all the Igbo conventional moonlight plays and folk tales (Igba Oro or Egwu Onwa) which impact sound moral values and unite children across Igbo families in a particular community are now things of the past. In one of the well-known traditional wrestling communities known as Ezeogbamgba (Ezeogba) (king of wrestlers) in Emekuku, Owerri, Imo State, Elder P C Amadi recounts that; "the last my village experienced traditional wrestling contest was in the late 1940s, when my late brother Simeon Njoku threw a great wrestler from a neighboring village. It was historic and memorable"<sup>22</sup>

**Igo na Iwa Oji (Blessing And Breaking of Kola Nut):** The Igbo traditional way of *Igo na Iwa oji* has seriously experienced an obvious change in recent times. We have left the natural and traditionally transcended mode of blessing and breaking of kola nut in Igbo land. Today, experience has shown that the way the cherished kola nuts is blessed is a disconnect with Igbo cultural values.

**Influence on Igbo attire:** The influence of migration on Igbo style and manner of dressing is becoming a topic of serious concern. The level of indecent dressing among contemporary Igbo, throws a very big question mark to the Igbo cultural sense of dressing. Here, we are not saying that the Igbo should return to their pristine way of dressing which consisted of little clothing, as the purpose of clothing originally was simply to cover private parts. The point of emphasis here is that whatever the contemporary dressing style is, the sense of covering properly the private parts of the body should not elude our mind.

**Language mutation:** Most people who speak core Igbo language are now being considered as uncivilized people. Igbo language, if not properly considered, will soon fade away or being spoken by just a few persons. A story was told about a woman living in Onitsha, who severely punished her children for speaking Igbo in the house. An Igbo child quickly knows what soup is, but does not know what *ofe* is. They know what broom is, but do not know what *Aziza* is. Most of all the primary and secondary schools in Igbo land have Igbo language in their school curriculum. They tend to promote Igbo Cultural Identity but give all manners of punishment to any student who freely expresses himself/herself in Igbo language. Language, we must note, is an essential carrier of cultural identity. And as such, the negative influence of

migration on Igbo language speaks nothing but doom on Igbo cultural identity.

**Music and dancing style:** The same influence on migration can also be found in Igbo music and dancing styles. Most of the Igbo musicians only bear the name 'Igbo musicians' because of their places of origin and not by the virtue of the language and content of their songs. Through music, one can present his culture to the world at large. Nigga Raw, Phyno, Flavour etc, keep winning people's admiration (Igbo) because they sing and rap in their native Igbo dialects and people (Igbo) have no stress in understanding their songs. *Atilogwu* is one of the most popular dancing styles in Igboland. Enugu, Anambra have theirs that are part of their identity. Igba ndi eze is also music of the Igbo people. Mbaise people have a very lovely cultural music group called Abigbo cultural group. This cultural group comprises of elderly men and their music is purely of Igbo culture and traditional values. However, most youths are not interested in the core Igbo traditional affairs. They now see Igbo cultural values as fetish, so primitive and archaic.

**Religion:** Prior to the coming of the missionaries, Igbo had a religion and religious practice that was enshrined in their culture. The concept of a Being called God is not foreign in Igbo tradition. The foreign religions such as Christianity and Islam have actually pushed Igbo people away from their original religious background. The ways and manners marriages, burial, naming ceremonies are conducted today has no link with Igbo culture and values. There is a kind of serious disconnect with the ancestral world. The pouring of libation and many other things which forms part and parcel of Igbo cultural identity have been tremendously affected by force of migration.

### **Concluding Reflection**

Every continent, nation or tribe has certain peculiarities in their way of life. Cultural Identity identifies one as an ambassador of a particular culture. Man, by nature, is not confined to a particular geographical location. The ontological insatiability in man makes him to be ever longing for a better living. One of the Igbo proverbs states: 'Anaghi ano ofu ebe ekiri mmonwu' (one does not admire a masquerade from only one standpoint). This literally means that one cannot have a holistic view about the particular reality while standing at a particular spot. This movement could be understood in a way as migration in the sense that one moves from a particular geographical location to another. The effects of migration could be positive or negative. No cultural is ever complete such that it needs no other culture. The point is that the rate at which importation from other cultures dominates Igbo core cultural

identity is becoming a blow on the face of Igbo Cultural Identity heritage. Imported cultures should enhance and facilitate what we have already as Igbo Cultural Identity rather than overshadowing it. Acculturation through migration should be welcomed without annihilating the core identity of the Igbo culture.

Migration which has been seen as the movement of individual or group of individuals from one geographical region to another has been obviously influencing the cultural identity of the Igbo people. This influence can be seen from two dimensions: the positive influence which enrich the Igbo Cultural Identity and the negative influence that is contributing to the annihilation of the Igbo Cultural values. Various aspects of Igbo identity have been seriously affected as a result of migration. No culture is the best and no culture should condemn or serve as a yardstick for the justification of another culture. The brain behind acculturation or any activity that brings people of different cultures together is not for one to subdue the other or make the other feel too inferior. It is for enrichment and betterment of different cultures.

Finally, technical measures are to be taken to checkmate the level of Igbo loss of cultural identity as a result of migration. It is not a cultural crime for a particular culture to be open to another, the problem is the total subjugation and annihilation of the indigenous culture. This study therefore, is a passionate call on all Igbo scholars, traditional rulers, public servants of Igbo extraction and all people of good will to help to revitalize the Igbo culture identity. A person without identity is a nobody in the society. Every people have cultural identity and when there is a complete loss of identity of a particular people, it speaks nothing but doom. As a people, we have to think Igbo, behave Igbo and live Igbo. This is the only way we can maintain Igbo cultural identity. This study calls for Igbo Cultural Renaissance as a way of reviving Igbo cultural identity that is at the verge of extinction.

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