

IGBO DIASPORA SUSCEPTIBILITY TO WESTERN CULTURAL VALUES

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Abstract

Migration had always been integral to Igbo history during the Pre-Colonial, Colonial and Post-Colonial eras. However, the aftermath of the Nigerian Civil War had maximally influenced the rate of International migratory behaviour among the Igbo orchestrated by the desire for greener pastures. The susceptible nature of the Igbo diaspora to Westernization has enormous economic, social, and cultural implications for Igbo society, such that Western civilization has taken precedence over Igbo values and culture. The high level of assimilation into Westernization has led to cultural marginalization, a situation that often presents a real dilemma to Igbo in the Diaspora. In this regard, curiosity comes to mind and raises some apparent paradoxes on why the Igbo, who so much cherished their culture at home, now neglect the same culture abroad. The objective of this paper is to examine the challenges that the Igbo Diaspora faces in the face of two conflicting cultures (Igbo culture and Western culture), especially in raising their children born in the Diaspora in traditional Igbo cultural values despite the ubiquity of the Western socialization process. The methodology adopted by the paper is a historical approach and qualitative approach comprising oral sources and semi-structured interviews gotten from the experiences of Igbo Diasporas who usually come home for one function or the other. The paper found that Western practices are fast gripping into the lives of many Igbo Diasporas. Based on this, the paper concludes by urging that the Igbo Diaspora should evolve a viable option and measures to retain their traditional culture while still living in the Western culture.

Keywords: Migration, Diaspora, Igbo, Culture, Westernization, Socialization, Nigeria

Introduction

Uncertainty and risk perceptions have

always been important elements in the decision-making process about migration. Migration has always been an integral part of mankind, beginning from the treks of nomad tribes to the mobility of individuals. Migration is usually triggered by the pull and push factor which has to do with the search for a new geographic location to satisfy the sustenance needs of individuals, families and in some cases, a whole tribe/clan. The migration decision is a decision taken in the context of uncertainty and risk. Information about the future is incomplete, and whether migration turns out to be a success or a failure for individuals depends very much on circumstances that are *ex ante* unknown.

Individuals with migration intentions continuously assess general economic prospects, including the labour market situation, at home and abroad in order to form reference points and updates for their migration-related expectations. According to Braunvan, (2004), people tend to be pulled to the areas of prosperity and pushed from areas of decline. Migrants are usually concerned with the benefits they hope to gain by moving and usually give less thought to the problems that they will incur as a result of the process.

The migration of Igbo people in the diaspora was propelled by the assumptions that average Igbo migrants are generally risk-takers, however, Igbo migrants consider risk and uncertainty inter-temporally, e.g., by trading medium-level risks for

immediate higher risks, and therefore contribute to a risk-diversification of earnings among family members. The Igbo travelled out of Nigeria to look for a greener pasture and settle down at their host country for either on long-term, or short-term bases. Travelling out of their homeland the Igbo people took a different dimension after the Nigerian civil war in the 1970s. There were identifiable factors such as the economic, political, as well as social pushes and pull factors that made them migrate to the Western countries of the USA, UK, Germany, Canada, Australia, and in recent times China and other Asian tiger countries (Gordon: 1998). Following the menace of the Nigeria civil war, hundreds of Igbo professional teachers, doctors and engineers left Nigeria in search of better opportunities outside Nigeria. This new trend coincided with worsening economic conditions, political and social instability and the emergence of unruly political tussles that limited the expression of basic human and civil freedoms.

In the traditional viewpoint, people migrate when they are both pushed by a lack of opportunities at home and pulled by the hope of economic gains elsewhere. Thus, the hope that migration will help individual migrants more closely with available economic opportunities, employment and services elsewhere is a major incentive for migration. (Zezeza: 2002). Arguably, migration is necessarily a part of a family strategy to raise income, obtain new funds for investment, and insure against risks. It

is not surprising therefore that thousands of Igbo workers with relevant skill endowments leave Nigeria yearly to pursue better economic prospects within or outside Africa (Alawiye: 2012).

Migrants who leave Nigeria arrive at their countries of destination with broad plans, defined intentions, and hopes and are faced with personality fully socialized in a society with limited options or unsatisfactory and unfair social and economic regimes. The process of migration involves cultural contact resulting in cultural diffusion, assimilation and adaptation among different groups, especially in countries where social interaction is more complex and dynamic. In many instances, certain cultural values of the host countries are assimilated while some aspects of the Diasporas' culture are lost over time and the younger generation may be ignorant about the existence of such cultural values and beliefs (Okwuchi, 1992).

Given this, there is a high probability of loss of certain elements of the Diaspora cultural values due to their susceptibility to Western cultures. The retention of some aspects of culture could engender stronger evidence of cultural identity among the migrants. Wusu and Isiugo (2006) indicated that migration poses a threat to the continued existence of indigenous cultures of migrants in their host communities, there is concern about the ability of the diaspora to retain their cultural identity while simultaneously adapting to the host communities'

norms and values.

The Igbo had been adjudged to be ubiquitous. This is because it is very difficult to travel across Nigeria, Africa and the globe without seeing the Igbo in those places carrying out one transaction or the other (Orji: 2020). There is a popular saying in the local palace that "*anywhere you go and you do not see any Igbo person there, you should leave the environment*". The Igbo people in their nature are susceptible to adapting to whatever environment they find themselves in. In other to achieve their aims of 'making it abroad' which is one of the pull factors that motivated them to leave their country of origin, the Igbo diaspora often rewrites their identities and belonging by adopting Western values. With that, the Igbo cultural values are threatened by the unstoppable influence of Westernisation on Igbo in the diaspora. Indeed, the disparity gap in cultural values and norms which Igbo immigrants have assimilated into the host culture is always in contrast to their traditional cultural values, which may have detrimental effects on the Igbo families in the Diaspora. This is so because within such a new environment, new cultural values emerge and new personalities are formed, thus impeding on Igbo cultural values and norms.

This paper examines the susceptibility of the Igbo to cultural changes and challenges that the Igbo Diaspora community in the Western countries (with the US in focus) are confronted

with in the face of Western cultural values, as well as the difficulty of inculcating on young Igbo people in Diaspora the Igbo cultural values. Whilst it is a great idea for Igbo immigrants to emulate decent and appropriate Western cultural values it will also be wrong to abandon Igbo's rich cultural practices.

Understanding the Evolution of Igbo Diaspora

The history or evolution of the Igbo Diaspora just like other Diaspora communities had evolved in three stages. The first stage had to do with the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, which took place between the 16th and late 19th centuries. Most Igbo slaves were taken from the Bight of Biafra. Afigbo (1982) stated that the Igbo slaves who were captured during the slave trade era were dispersed to colonies such as Jamaica, Cuba, Haiti, the United States and Trinidad and Tobago, among others.

After the first stage of the Igbo Diaspora evolution which came to an end shortly before colonialism in Nigeria, came the second stage when the European missionaries that came to Igbo land introduced education. Some of the brilliant students then were taken abroad to go and further their education to come back and help the white missionaries in the propagation of the Christian faith. Among the Igbo that benefited from the missionary gesture were Cardinal Francis Arinze, the late Rev. Fr. Iwene Tansi, Isaac Iwekanuno, and Pita Nwana among others. (Oraka: 1983). This stage lasted

till the outbreak of the Nigerian Civil War. During this period, migration became historically a way of life and Igbo people always exhibited a keen tendency to migrate in search of education rather than economic activities.

The third stage of the evolution started in the late 1970s. Following the menace of the Nigeria civil war, hundreds of Igbo professional teachers, doctors and engineers left Nigeria in search of better opportunities outside Nigeria. This new trend coincided with worsening economic conditions, political and social instability and the emergence of an unruly military dictatorship that limited the expression of basic human and civil freedoms. It was during this time that many Igbo professionals moved to America, Europe, Asia UAE and other parts of Africa and the phenomenon known today as brain drain began.

Speaking it was a period when living either in the US or abroad, was the desire of most Nigerians. It was a period when girls jilted their lovers for unknown Nigerian males from the USA or when families mortgaged their homes to send their kids overseas (Orji: 2020) Igbo and many other Africans see the Western countries as the lands of immense economic opportunity, liberty, and freedom. This has created "a going abroad" syndrome in all levels of Igbo society, particularly among youths, urbanites, and educated people. The picture of life created by returnees is that

overseas is a place where it is possible to survive on minimum wages and where the monthly minimum wage is more than the average African worker makes in a year (Arthur, 2000:24). This has made it possible for Igbo immigrants abroad to share their relative prosperity by making remittances annually back to their families and friends (Roberts: 2005).

Despite all these mentioned above it is pertinent to note that the susceptibility of the Igbo people in the diaspora to Western culture may have had a negative influence on the cultural values of the Igbo people. Its effect may be detrimental to the young people in the diaspora, who may have little knowledge or none about the Igbo cultural values thereby hurting their relationships, attitudes, values and expectations, clothing, food, religion and music, among others.

Cultural Conflicts faced by Igbo Diaspora

Cultural identity is important among the Igbo, and they attach particular importance to retaining their culture. Wherever the Igbo migrate to, they do not leave their values, beliefs or culture behind, no matter the circumstances surrounding their migration. However, when two cultures come in contact, then several events may occur, part of which is acculturation. According to Berry (2002), the process of acculturation is akin to the psychological models of moving towards, moving against and moving away from a stimulus. The process of acculturation requires two cultures to

come into contact and both cultures may experience some change. In reality, however, one cultural group will often dominate the other group. Acculturation has been defined as a 'phenomenon' which results when groups of individuals from different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either one or both groups (Redfield: 1936).

The indigenous cultural components which have been in conflict as faced by the Igbo Diaspora in their host country can be classified under, marriage, attitudes, values and expectations, clothing, food, religion and music, among others.

Marriage:

Among the Igbo, marriage is considered to be a lifelong commitment by two peoples to each other and is signified by a contract sanctioned by the community. Marriage is understood as a union of families, instead of a union of just two individuals (Enwereji: 2008). This is what makes marital breakdown very difficult because domestic squabble between spouses that threaten the marriage being on the verge of collapse will bring together a small group of immediate/extended family members of the spouse concerned, and acting in an advisory capacity, they seek to reduce the level of violence after which they will then attempt to resolve the actual dispute through mediation (Stevens, 2000). This explains why marriages are hardly abruptly broken in Igboland. Indeed,

many Igbo women endure their marriages for the sake of their children's future and to avoid the negative publicity such dissolution will bring to them and their families (Egodi, 2006).

However, Cultural re-adaptation in the US has introduced new dimensions that challenge the patriarchal nature of Igbo men in some Igbo marriages in the diaspora. Some Igbo women when they arrive in the U.S. are exposed to a society that gives every individual (irrespective of sex), equal opportunities and freedom to create more egalitarian relationships, than what is obtainable in the Igbo society in Nigeria (Djamba 1999). These men with their patriarchal mentality sometimes feel threatened because working outside the home has left their wives with a sense of strong identity, and reasonable financial independence which was inconceivable in some Igbo societies back home, where some mean husbands would not have allowed their wives to own a bank account, buy a house and above all will always expect their wife to seek approval from the man on when and how she spends her money, all in the name of been submissive. With this newfound changing gender role in the US, some patriarchal Igbo men feel threatened by their men's hegemonic masculinity centred on being the main provider and decision-maker in the family. The changing gender relations and roles have resulted in some marital issues, some men sharing roles in the

family, and for some, the re-adjustment of gender relations and roles (Chima: 2020). However, other Igbo couples who have come to understand the Western idea of marriage are taking advantage of the egalitarian relationship obtainable in the US to enjoy their marriage (Agbali 2012).

Some Igbo men in the Diaspora who still operate with the patriarchal and men hegemony mentality in marriage are finding it problematic to adjust in the host country, and as a result, some of the Igbo marriages are having issues (Ndulo: 2001) because some of the Igbo women who had overcoming some of the challenges women are faced in the diaspora such as underprivileged in gendered; racial and perhaps class categories; the struggles that transcend gender; including processes of violence, systematic inequality, structural racism and corporate globalisation, sometimes demand public affections from their husbands like kissing in public as most American spouses do, which Igbo men in the traditional Igbo society do not necessarily do. Emphasis is placed on responsibility and respect for one another, attention to the moral upbringing of children, attention to the education of the children, fidelity in monogamous couples, and caring for the needs of extended families (Falola, 2001: 120).

Expectations and Norms:

Expectations and Norms from couples differ between traditional Igbo society and the US. Someone who grew up in

Igboland where it is the norm and expectation for women to cook, do household chores, raise the kids and serve the husband, will have a cultural shock when exposed to the American society, where women share family responsibilities with their spouses. Some women can hold important non-domestic jobs and are financially strong in the US and in that regard can have an equal say on issues in the home, and can financially contribute to the upkeep of the family (Nyang: 2015). Since women can contribute to the family upkeep, it is then expected that household chores like cooking, doing dishes, sweeping and doing laundry as well as picking the kids up from day-care and raising them should be shared with the men.

However, Some Igbo men see these changes as challenges to their masculinity. In some situations, the men's reactions lead to friction, which in some cases has caused marital problems that have sometimes led to divorce (Nnanna: 2020). The incidence of divorce, which has witnessed a rise in the number of lone-parent households, has been found to have social, psychological and educational effects on children differently, depending on their gender, age and stage of development. Such impacts transcend beyond the children of divorced parents to the spouses themselves.

Young Igbo Marriages

For some Igbo parents, the idea of a child determining his/her wishes when contemplating marriage against their

parent's wishes is culturally inappropriate as it undermines values of respect for elders. (Burke: 1998). This perhaps undermines their children's marital wishes and love connections. In the traditional Igbo society, parental consent is important and has to be guaranteed before any progress is made in marriage; however, some parents encounter role strain as they attempt to shape the cultural identity of their children through marriage. This practice that is obtainable in Igboland has sometimes led to conflicts between parents and their children when the parents try to replicate the practice in the diaspora, over the choice of their children's marriages (Chima: 2020). Some of the Igbo young diasporas will prefer to marry men or women of their choice irrespective of their nationality, colour or religion, and the conflicts usually arise when their Igbo parents insist that they must marry an Igbo person, or some parents are even specific – “it must be someone from their immediate community” (Chikelue: 2020).

Most Igbo parents in an attempt to make their dreams come true have resorted to planning summer vacations especially for the girls to travel back to Nigeria to connect them with the Igbo cultural values and way of life. Disagreement between parents and their kids on who they choose to marry has resulted in parents alienating or holding out their approval because their daughter or son chooses a man or woman who is a Westerner. This problem which is becoming endemic among many parents can

systematically ruin the lives of these kids (at least those who chose to obey) or they are not on talking terms with those who went ahead and marry a non-Igbo person (Awodele: 2013).

Culture Conflicts and the Igbo Child in the Diaspora:

Several African immigrants are confronted by many challenges in the U.S. most especially when it comes to culture. However, many of such cultural challenges are not peculiar to Africans. Most immigrants contend with them. For many Igbo parents raising their children in the U.S is a very daunting and challenging task. (Arthur, 2000). The diaspora is usually torn between two cultures, (Awodele: 2013), and Igbo parents in the Diaspora are not exemption. They are sometimes in a dilemma as to where to raise their children because some of them often display behaviours that, under normal circumstances, would not be tolerated or accepted in an Igbo society. (Orji: 2017) In the United States, for instance, young Igbo immigrants are faced with the challenge of maintaining Igbo values and adopting American cultural identities. Some of them are resisting the wholesome adoption of Igbo culture by claiming their right to define and interpret the world from their perspective and the new choices that America offers. (Arthur, 2000). Among young immigrants, the expression of identity in the immigrant community is seen in clothing, hairstyle, and language patterns.

Discipline

In Igbo society, corporal punishment in the home is often used by parents to correct and enforce moral behaviour in the child. However, the case is different in the Western world where it is believed that corporal punishment is tantamount to a violation of children's rights. This has presented a difficult situation for Igbo parents in the diaspora who resist the temptation of applying any form of discipline on their children for fear of running into trouble with child protective services and being branded a child abuser (Chikelue 2020). In the United States, the children's access to/calls to call the police (911) has added to the frustrations of some Igbo parents because this condition is detrimental to family cohesion as well as to the mental growth and moral development of the child. Some of the children have joined gangs, doing drugs, steal and killing, sexual precocity, rising teenage pregnancy and prostitution, and cutting classes or dropping out of school and other self-destructive behaviours (Dike, 2004).

For Igbo immigrant families, who are fiercely traditional and deeply committed to the Igbo cultural values and ideals, the behavioural acting-out of their children can be devastating and humiliating when they find themselves hard-pressed to deal with their children's often severe and unfamiliar emotional and behavioural problems, particularly without the support of extended family and the greater Igbo community. Consequently, there is a growing trend among some immigrants to send their children home

to be raised by maternal or paternal relatives to expose the children to proven methods of family socialization and child-rearing in Africa (Chima 2020). The biological parents in the United States send remittances home to support the child (ren). The children do not come back to the United States until they have completed the rigorous secondary school curriculum to attend college (Arthur, 2000:119). This gives the child the opportunity to know immediate and extended family members and to grow up in an environment where morality and good character education are relatively regarded (Arthur, 2000:119).

Language

The Igbo language remains the symbol of the people's ethnic identity. The language gives their speakers a positive self-image. Parents of Igbo children face special challenges in terms of helping their children maintain a positive cultural identity through the language used in communicating. Most Igbo people use English as their primary medium of communication with colleagues and Americans formally and informally at work and social events, at home they tend to communicate in their mother tongue. Therefore, while raising children in the Diaspora, some insist that their child speak only the home language at home and save English for school and other public domains. Home language for such parents remains a symbol of cultural survival, while school language is perceived as a means to an end—material survival (Yenika-Agbaw, 2009).

However, the transition between the home and school languages can be tenuous as well, as gradually some Igbo children begin to regard the language spoken at home as inferior simply because many of their mainstream peers are unfamiliar with it. It is as a result of this negligence that there is a rising body of young Igbo who do not speak Igbo languages. Many thought that these languages would be acquired, as if by osmosis, through the child's interaction with members of the family (Nyang 2015). Given these challenges, it is appropriate to raise the question of socialization and the need for social and moral agency in the education of Igbo immigrant children (Lamba 2000). The gradual extinction of this language is, therefore, a sign of the disintegration of the unity of the Igbo people. Once languages which bind the people together die, the basis of their unity and group identity will be undermined. Arguably, as it stands now Igbo languages are experiencing language contraction because the host culture has subsumed the Igbo language in the States, as a result, the precious cultural practices of the people are also shrinking (Ijeoma: 2019).

Food:

Food is a major source of intergenerational conflicts among Igbo immigrants and their children in the Diaspora because, in reality, a lot of Igbo men and women have their preferences for traditional recipes based on their customs, religions, and available food resources. In the

southeast, among the coastal communities, the choice meals are seafood and yam stew. Among the Igbo, yam and *gari* dumplings are the favourites, while soups such as *onugbo* (Bitter leave), *egusi* (melon) *ofe owerri*, *Ugu* (pumpkin leaves) and *okazi* vegetables are added to beef, fish crayfish, and spices are most preferred. (Falola, 2001: 103).

The preference for Igbo dishes explains why the Igbo have exported some of their foods and cooking techniques abroad. Ironically, this is not the case with young immigrants who cannot hide their dislike for Igbo dishes which many of them claim smell and taste nasty. (Okemo 2006). Their dislike may be attributable to the type of meals immigrant children are accustomed to in the school cafeteria and fast-food restaurants – MacDonald’s, Burger King, KFC, and Subway among others. It, therefore, behoves parents to carefully introduce Igbo food culture to their kids when they are young rather than try to force it on them when they are old to decide for themselves.

Traditional Dress:

Dress fulfils the essential need to protect the body. It is also associated with the desire to appear good and “civilized”. But dress does more than that. The majority of Igbo wear traditional dress or a modified version on a routine basis. Even the elite who wear Western attire in the workplace prefer traditional garments for ceremonies and special occasions. (Falola, 2001: 106 -115)

Traditionally, the Igbo, especially Igbo women, believed in and valued decorating their bodies for a variety of reasons including aesthetics. Body decorations for women included various styles of hairdos and also involved painting the body with temporary traditional cosmetic makeup, using *nzu* (white chalk), *uri* or *uli* (the black dye used by women to draw ornamental patterns on each other's body), *edo* (yellow dye), and *ufie* or *uhie* (carmine). Later, during this period, women started wearing loose natural black eye powder (*tanjele*) on the eyelids (Ukwu, 2000).

Among the young diaspora is the growing trend to ditch African dress style for “American celebrity style” which includes wearing “designer dress” and sagging pants with “underwear exposed. Fashion trends for most young girls which include thongs and spaghetti hand clothes are provocative and amount to a near total abandonment of modesty which is un-African for Nigerian girls to be clad in dresses that reveal the essentials: boobs, buttocks, backs and hips. With the changing emphasis on dress style among young boys and girls, and updating their look and style to meet the standard of the younger American population, there is no doubt that African culture in the Diaspora is at a crossroads (Nwora: 2008).

Mystery of Home Return

Meanwhile, some Igbo migrants are been confronted with the “mystery of home return”. All immigrants always have the notion of leaving their home

countries for countries of settlement, striking it rich, and then returning home with enough resources to live well in their countries of origin (Nyang 2015). More often than not, they don't actualize these lofty dreams. On several occasions, single immigrants obtain their "Green cards" and integrate into American society, marry American citizens (US Homeland: 2007) and end up with a family and children. The Igbo immigrant who finds himself in this kind of situation may be constrained to stay longer than was anticipated to ensure his children's education and autonomy before going back (Abdullah: 1999). In some cases, the children that they were waiting for before relocating back home, end up starting their own families and what was originally meant to be short-term migration becomes permanent. As a result of the uncertainty of returning home among the Igbo diaspora, there is a serious gap between ideals and realities. Most have grand ideas about what they would like to contribute to the transformation of their home countries. Because of their procrastination and ambivalence, they focus on their host countries, while

neglecting to socialize their children to cope with life in their countries of origin.

Conclusion

The pervasive influence of American cultural values on Igbos in the Diaspora has stripped Igbo people of their values and culture. Indeed, the Western methods of diffusion have easily helped to supplant traditional ideas and values which stand in sharp contrast to Igbo cultural values and their way of life. This "Fatal Attraction" best explains the challenges that Igbos in the Diaspora face in inculcating Igbo cultural values in their children. This unfortunate development is examined alongside the dilemma Diaspora face in their marriages essentially because the society in which they live do not subscribe to the African traditional values they cherish. Although this is frustrating, to say the least, in this age of globalization, there is a need to bridge the gaps between African traditional values and those of the West

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