

AN AFRICAN IGBO RELIGIOUS PERSPECTIVE ON NIGERIAN MIGRATION DYNAMICS

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Abstract

This study examined Nigerian migration dynamics from an Igbo religious perspective, with particular attention to the South-Eastern region of Nigeria. The study adopted a mixed-method research design, combining phenomenological and descriptive survey approaches. The study was conducted across the five states of South-Eastern Nigeria, namely Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo States. The population of the study was approximately 21,955,414, from which a sample of 120 respondents was selected through a multi-stage sampling procedure involving simple random, disproportionate stratified, and convenience sampling techniques. Data were collected using a researcher-developed instrument titled Nigerian Migration Dynamics: Igbo Religious Perspective (NMDIRP). The reliability of the instrument was established using Cronbach's alpha, which yielded a reliability coefficient of 0.82. Five research questions and one hypothesis guided the study. Data collected were analysed using mean and standard deviation to answer the research questions, while the t-test was employed to test the hypothesis at the 0.05 level of significance. The findings revealed that economic considerations constitute a major factor influencing migration among people from South-Eastern Nigeria. The study further established a relatively high desire among South-Eastern Nigerians, particularly the Igbo, to migrate in search of improved economic and social opportunities. From a religious and cultural perspective, the findings suggest that migration is also influenced by traditional Igbo values concerning enterprise, mobility, family advancement, social status, and the pursuit of a better life. The study further revealed that there was no significant difference between the mean responses of male and female respondents regarding migration dynamics. It also identified deceptive and dangerous migration practices, including drug trafficking, fraudulent marriage promises, trafficking in human body parts, irregular sea journeys, and prostitution, as some of the challenges associated with migration. The study concludes that Igbo religious and cultural values provide an important framework for understanding the motivations, experiences, risks, and social consequences of migration among the Igbo. It therefore recommends greater engagement of religious and traditional institutions in migration education, ethical

formation, prevention of human trafficking, and the promotion of safe and responsible migration practices.

Keywords: Nigeria, Migration Dynamics, South-East, Igbo

Introduction

Migration is a life-altering experience that significantly contributes to the formation and reconstruction of individual and collective identities. Across human societies, people migrate for various economic, social, political, religious, educational, and security-related reasons. In contemporary Nigeria, migration has become an increasingly significant social phenomenon, particularly among young people who seek opportunities beyond their immediate communities and national borders. For many migrants, movement to other regions or countries represents an attempt to improve their livelihoods, acquire better educational and employment opportunities, support their families, and attain a higher standard of living. Among the major ethnic groups in Nigeria, migration occupies a particularly significant place in the social and economic experience of the Igbo people of South-Eastern Nigeria. The desire to travel and establish economic networks beyond one's immediate community has historically been associated with Igbo patterns of mobility, enterprise, and social advancement. In contemporary times, this mobility has expanded beyond Nigeria to other African countries, Europe, North America, and other parts of the world. Many Igbo migrants participate in transnational movements in search of employment, business opportunities, education, professional advancement, and improved living conditions.

The South-East of Nigeria comprises Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo States and constitutes the principal geographical homeland of the Igbo. The region is situated in the eastern part of Nigeria, with the Niger River historically serving as an important geographical reference point in discussions of the distribution of Igbo communities. Igbo-speaking communities also exist outside the five South-Eastern states, including parts of Delta and Rivers States. Consequently, the geographical distribution of the Igbo extends beyond the administrative boundaries of the contemporary South-East geopolitical zone. Nevertheless, this study focuses primarily on the Igbo populations of the five South-Eastern states.

Migration among the Igbo should not, however, be understood solely as an economic phenomenon. It is also embedded in cultural values, religious beliefs, family expectations, community obligations, and ideas about personal achievement. Traditional Igbo society places considerable emphasis on hard work, self-reliance, enterprise, social mobility, family responsibility, and the acquisition of wealth for individual and communal advancement. These values can influence the aspirations of individuals who consider migration as a pathway towards economic improvement and social recognition. The Igbo concept of *igba mbo* (effort or striving) and the broader cultural expectation that an individual should work towards improving the welfare and

status of the family provide useful cultural contexts for understanding migration aspirations.

Religion also constitutes an important dimension of the migration experience. Within Igbo society, religious beliefs and practices have historically shaped people's understanding of work, prosperity, family obligations, destiny, community, and relationships with the spiritual world. Although Christianity has become the dominant religious affiliation among contemporary Igbo communities, elements of indigenous religious worldview and traditional cultural values continue to influence social attitudes and practices. Consequently, migration can be examined not only as geographical mobility but also as a process through which individuals negotiate their religious identities, cultural values, family relationships, and responsibilities to their communities. The contemporary migration experience of many Nigerians is also shaped by structural socioeconomic conditions. Nigeria occupies approximately 923,768 square kilometres and has a population exceeding 200 million people. Rapid population growth, unemployment, underemployment, inadequate infrastructure, insecurity, economic hardship, and perceived weaknesses in governance have contributed to migration pressures. For some individuals, these conditions create a perception that opportunities for economic and social advancement are greater outside their immediate communities or outside Nigeria. Migration therefore becomes both a response to existing socioeconomic difficulties and an aspiration for a more secure and prosperous future.

For many Igbo migrants, international migration is accompanied by significant risks and challenges. Migrants may encounter discrimination, exploitation, cultural dislocation, immigration restrictions, unemployment, social exclusion, and other forms of vulnerability in destination countries. Some migrants also become exposed to irregular migration networks, human trafficking, fraudulent employment arrangements, deceptive marriage schemes, prostitution, drug trafficking, and dangerous journeys across deserts or seas. The desire for economic improvement can therefore place individuals in situations where the anticipated benefits of migration must be weighed against substantial personal, social, and ethical risks. At the same time, migration produces important consequences for families and communities in the South-East. Successful migrants often remit money to relatives, finance education, establish businesses, construct houses, support religious activities, and contribute to community development. Through these activities, migrants maintain strong social, cultural, and religious connections with their communities of origin. Migration therefore creates transnational relationships in which people may simultaneously participate in the social and economic life of their host societies and remain deeply connected to their Igbo communities.

The study of Nigerian migration from an Igbo religious and cultural perspective is therefore significant because it provides an opportunity to examine the interaction

between migration, religion, culture, economic aspirations, family obligations, and identity. Rather than treating migration simply as a demographic or economic movement, this study understands it as a complex human experience through which individuals negotiate their identity, values, aspirations, religious beliefs, and responsibilities to their families and communities.

It is against this background that this study examines **Nigerian Migration Dynamics: An Igbo Religious and Cultural Perspective**, with particular attention to the experiences and perceptions of people from South-Eastern Nigeria. The study also considers the motivations for migration, the influence of Igbo cultural and religious values on migration decisions, the challenges encountered by migrants, and the implications of migration for individuals, families, religious institutions, and Igbo society.

The failure of Nigerian government to adequately manage the huge wealth she is endowed with added impetus to the quest of youths to travel. As noted by Egwu Henry, Anthony Esedebu and Okpara Justina (Personal Communication January 10, 2021), a visit to the American, Asian and European embassies will embarrassingly show that the number of South East outweighs those from other regions.

Table 1. Population of South East

Rank (2006)	State	Population (2006)	Population (2016)
1	Anambra State	4,177,828	5,527,809
2	Imo State	3,927,563	5,408,756
3	Enugu State	3,267,837	4,411,119
4	Ebonyi State	2,176,947	2,880,383
5	Abia State	2,845,380	3,727,347
			21,955,414

SOURCE: National Populations Commission 2006 Census

<https://nigerianstat.gov.ng/download/775>

Accessed January 12, 2021.

Kalu Diogu, (leader of the Abia State Indigenes in Diaspora and a past Chairman of World Igbo Congress (WIC) asserted that 70 percent of 12 million Nigerians overseas are Igbo. These Nigerians abroad repatriate over N23 billion every year to their Nigerian dependants and personal investments. South East which is the focus of this work is bedevilled with a seemingly intractable challenge of unemployment and poor leadership.. As Achebe (1988) noted the problem of Nigeria is nothing but leadership problem. While herdsmen and Boko haram attacks are currently ravaging the Northern and some of the eastern parts of the country, the menaces of poverty and bad leadership have been posing a strong security threat in the South East resulting in kidnapping, ritual, cybercrime (yahoo plus) and quest to migrate by all means possible. In his analysis of the chequered political history of Nigeria, Jauhari (2011) notes that after gaining independence from the British in 1960 Nigerian leadership alternated between civilian rule (1960-66, 1979-83 and 1999 onwards) and military rule (1966-79 and 1983-99). Bamgboye (2014) notes that widespread corruption, depletion of nation's foreign reserves et al compounded and made the several socio-economic programmes of successive military regimes to be less impactful on the socio-economic development of Nigeria, in spite of the economic revenues accruing to the country from crude oil during the military rule. Ever since the first military intervention in 1966, each military rule has violated the rule of law. Frank and Ukpere (2012) bemoan the fact that apart from eroding the Nigeria civic culture, the military regimes created a culture of violence, had a rule of operation based on force and repression, disregard of court orders and violation of human rights. This shift in the supposed duty of leaders encourages youths to seek more organized society.

Objectives of the study

The question that readily comes to mind is what is the extent to which South East States are willing to migrate. Focusing on the above question, this study seeks to achieve the following specific objectives:

1. To determine the extent to which people migrate from South East.
2. To determine the extent to which the act of migration is attributed to South East amongst other states
3. To determine the mean difference in the response of male and female respondents with respect to migration in the South East.
4. To determine the various practices or means employed by the Igbo to migrate.
5. To find out the socio-political, and African religious and cultural values approaches required in curtailing unhealthy migration.

Research Questions

1. To what extent do South Easterners migrate abroad.
2. What is the extent to which illegal migration is attributed to people from the South East.
3. What is the difference in the mean response of male and female respondents with respect to Migration in the South East?
4. What are the various illegal practices by Igbo to travel out of their land?
5. What are the socio-political, African cultural religious and value education approaches required in curtailing migration abuses?

Hypothesis

H₀₁: There is no significant difference in the mean responses of male and female respondents with respect to migration in the South East.

Conceptual clarification

Migration: Migration is used in this work to refer to the process involved in the act of moving from one place to another in order to live and work. Movement of people from their home to another city, state or country for a job, shelter or some other reasons is called migration. Migration from rural areas to urban areas has increased in past few years among the Igbo people.

Poverty: According to UNDP (1997) poverty means a man's inability to afford food, shelter, clothing and recreation. Okafor (2003:3) posits that "human poverty connotes deprivations or denials of certain needs, services and denials of all attributes of human development. A definition of poverty which encompasses both the developing and developed country was published in the *Copenhagen Declaration* of the United Nations in 1995. According to Davis and Sanchez-Martinez (2014), during the summit leading to that declaration, it was agreed that poverty includes: lack of income and productive resources to ensure sustainable livelihoods; hunger and malnutrition; ill health; limited or lack of access to education and other basic services; increased morbidity and mortality from illness; homelessness and inadequate housing; unsafe environments and social discrimination and exclusion. It is also characterized by lack of participation in decision making and in civil, social and cultural life (United Nations, 1995).

Theoretical Framework

The work adopts the Ravenstein Laws of Migration as a theory to back up this study. Ernest Ravenstein is widely regarded as the earliest migration theorist. Ravenstein, an English geographer, used census data from England and Wales to develop his "Laws of Migration" (1889). He concluded that migration was governed by a "push-pull" process; that is, unfavourable conditions in one place (oppressive laws, heavy taxation, poverty in the South East, quest for wealth etc.) "Push" people out, and favourable conditions in an external location "pull" them out. Ravenstein's laws stated that the primary cause for migration was better external economic opportunities; the volume of

migration decreases as distance increases; migration occurs in stages instead of one long move; population movements are bilateral; and migration differentials (e.g., gender, social class, age) influence a person's mobility.

Many theorists have followed in Ravenstein's footsteps, and the dominant theories in contemporary scholarship are more or less variations of his conclusions. Lee (1966) reformulated Ravenstein's theory to give more emphasis to internal (or push) factors. Lee also outlined the impact that *intervening obstacles* have on the migration process. He argued that variables such as distance, physical and political barriers, and having dependents can impede or even prevent migration. Lee pointed out that the migration process is selective because differentials such as age, gender, and social class affect how persons respond to push-pull factors, and these conditions also shape their ability to overcome intervening obstacles. Furthermore, personal factors such as a person's education, knowledge of a potential receiver population, family ties, and the like can facilitate or retard migration.

Empirical Framework

South East can be regarded as one of the richest parts of the Nigerian State despite the three years of civil war (1967-1970) and greed of her political leadership. In the face of governments inability to provide adequately for this region, her youths especially resorted to migration and other forms of livelihood in the face of challenging poverty. For instance, poverty has risen in Nigeria with 82.9 million people living on less than One United States dollar per day. According to the 2019 Poverty and Inequality in Nigeria Report released by the National Bureau of Statistics, this figure represents 40.09 per cent of the total population. Many it seems had anticipated the down fall of the South East after the civil war, however the rate of development in the region shook the country. As noted by Amusi (1999) "Igbo became well known after the civil war". Supporting Amusi, Rachel (2002) asserted that the migration of Igbos particularly has caused Nigeria a serious brain drain.

The average South Easterner believes that it is very necessary to be wealthy, thus all forms of poverty must be abhorred. World Bank considers poverty to mean low income and the inability to acquire the basic goods and services necessary for survival with dignity. It encompasses low levels of health and education, poor access to clean water and sanitation, inadequate physical security, lack of voice, and insufficient capacity and opportunity to better one's life. The World Bank sets international poverty line, as living on less than \$1.90 a day. In a nutshell, the aforementioned definitions of poverty underscore the inabilities of individuals, families and communities to meet basic needs for good nutrition, portable water, proper sanitation, education, healthcare, and housing. The definitions also identified some other indicators for measuring poverty such as social exclusion, exploitation, physical security and access to social capital.

Methodology

This study adopted a mixed descriptive and phenomenological survey designs. This

study examined the extent to which people migrate to other destination with the limited scope of South East Nigeria. The study was carried out in the South-Eastern States of Anambra, Abia, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo states, Nigeria. The population of the study comprised of 21,955,414 persons (Nigeria Population Census, 2006) from 5 states of the federation. A sample size of 120 respondents was used for the study through multistage sampling procedure. Simple random sampling was used to select the individuals in the five state (5), disproportionate stratified sampling technique was used to select the 120 respondents from each of the 5 states after which convenience sampling technique was adopted to select the required sample size.

The researcher used a soft-self-developed instrument titled: Nigerian Migration Dynamics: South-East Perspective “(NMDSEP). The instrument was structured into four (4) clusters-A, B, C and D. Cluster A focused on the extent to which South Easterners Migrate; section B was on the extent of attribution of Poverty to migration; section C was on various practices engaged my Igbo Migrants while D focused on the approaches that can be employed by socio-political, African religious and cultural values orientations in curbing illegal migrations. The instrument was validated by two experts. The results obtained were presented in tables below.

The researchers used a mean value of 2.50 as the benchmark for decision making. A mean value of 2.50 and above was accepted while mean values below 2.50 were rejected.

This was arrived at thus: SA=4, A=3, D=2 and SD=1

$$\text{Criterion Mean } (\bar{X}) = \frac{4+3+2+1}{4} = \frac{10}{4} = 2.50$$

Discussion/Result of the Study

The result on the extent to which migration is practised among people of South-Eastern Nigeria revealed that all the items had mean values above the benchmark mean of **2.50**, with a grand mean of **2.93**. This indicates that migration among South-Eastern Nigerians occurs to a very high extent. In other words, the respondents generally agreed that the desire and efforts of people from the South-East to travel outside their immediate communities, other parts of Nigeria, and foreign countries are relatively high. This finding demonstrates that migration has become an important feature of the social, economic, and cultural life of the Igbo people.

The high prevalence of migration among the Igbo can partly be understood within the historical culture of mobility and enterprise in Igbo society. Traditionally, young people were encouraged to acquire skills, establish economic independence, travel to other communities, and return with resources and experience that could improve their social and economic status. Migration, therefore, should not necessarily be interpreted as an indication that migrants are fleeing poverty. Rather, it can also represent a deliberate strategy for economic advancement, social mobility, acquisition of knowledge, entrepreneurship, and family development.

The finding agrees with the observation of Unah (2010), who reported a high prevalence of migration in South-Eastern Nigeria. The high rate of migration may be associated with the strong entrepreneurial orientation of many Igbo communities and the cultural expectation that individuals should work towards improving their personal and family circumstances. The search for better economic opportunities is therefore an important factor motivating migration. However, the interpretation of migration exclusively as a response to poverty would provide only a partial understanding of the phenomenon.

Indeed, migration has contributed significantly to the economic transformation of many Igbo families and communities. Migrants who establish themselves successfully outside their communities frequently send remittances to their relatives at home. Such financial transfers may be used for children's education, healthcare, house construction, business establishment, agricultural activities, religious obligations, and other family needs. In this regard, migration becomes a mechanism through which resources acquired outside the community are transferred back to the community of origin. The positive contribution of migration can also be observed in the development of small and medium-scale enterprises in Igboland. Some migrants who acquire capital, business experience, professional skills, and international contacts abroad return to establish businesses in their communities. Others maintain businesses in Nigeria while operating simultaneously within international commercial networks. Such transnational economic relationships have expanded the commercial horizons of many Igbo entrepreneurs and have enabled some communities to participate in wider national and international markets.

Migration has also contributed to educational development among Igbo families. Income earned by migrants has enabled parents and relatives to finance the education of children and younger members of extended families. Some migrants have supported university education, professional training, vocational education, and overseas studies. In this respect, migration can contribute to the formation of human capital, particularly when financial resources acquired abroad are invested in education.

Another important contribution of migration is its impact on community development. Many Igbo migrants continue to maintain strong connections with their home communities through town unions, age grades, development associations, alumni organizations, churches, and other social institutions. Through these associations, migrants contribute financially and materially to projects such as roads, electricity, water supply, school buildings, health centres, churches, community halls, security initiatives, and scholarships. Consequently, migration has created an important source of external resources for community development in Igboland.

From an Igbo religious and cultural perspective, migration can also be understood through the traditional principle of **individual achievement being connected to communal responsibility**. In traditional Igbo society, the achievement of an individual was not regarded as exclusively personal; successful individuals were expected to contribute to the welfare of their families and communities. Contemporary migrants frequently demonstrate this principle when they return home to support relatives, participate in festivals, contribute to community projects, support religious institutions, and assist younger people to establish themselves economically. Migration has similarly influenced religious institutions in Igboland. Migrants contribute to the development of churches and other religious organizations through donations, building projects, educational programmes, welfare activities, and support for clergy and religious institutions. Some migrants also establish religious networks in their countries of destination, thereby creating transnational religious communities. These networks allow Igbo migrants to preserve aspects of their cultural and religious identity while simultaneously participating in new social environments.

The finding that migration occurs to a very high extent should therefore not automatically be interpreted negatively. While economic hardship, unemployment, insecurity, and the desire for better opportunities may motivate some people to migrate, migration itself can produce significant developmental benefits. The experiences, skills, capital, knowledge, professional networks, and international exposure acquired by migrants can subsequently benefit families and communities in the place of origin.

The finding may appear to contradict the assertion of Onwuemezie (2003), who portrays the Igbo as a relatively prosperous and economically resourceful people. However, the apparent contradiction may be explained by differences in geographical location, period of study, socioeconomic circumstances, and the categories of respondents involved. A community may possess considerable entrepreneurial and economic resources while its members still migrate in search of additional opportunities. Migration, therefore, should not be equated automatically with poverty. In fact, the entrepreneurial character of Igbo society may itself encourage migration. Individuals who possess resources, skills, ambition, and business experience may be more willing to move to places where they perceive greater commercial opportunities. From this perspective, migration can be regarded not merely as a push phenomenon caused by poverty but also as a pull phenomenon generated by the availability of new markets, employment opportunities, education, technology, and international business networks.

The religious and cultural dimension of the finding is particularly important. Igbo traditional worldview places considerable value on hard work, achievement, family responsibility, social recognition, and the improvement of one's material circumstances.

Contemporary Christian teachings among the Igbo also frequently emphasize diligence, stewardship, responsibility, generosity, and care for family members. These religious and cultural values may reinforce the willingness of individuals to seek legitimate opportunities beyond their immediate communities. Migration has consequently helped to broaden the worldview of many Igbo people. Migrants encounter different cultures, technologies, educational systems, economic practices, political institutions, and religious traditions. When such knowledge is transferred back to Igboland through return migration, communication, investment, or social networks, it can contribute to cultural adaptation and innovation. Young people in particular may gain access to new ideas concerning entrepreneurship, education, technology, professional development, and international cooperation.

The results therefore suggest that migration among the Igbo should be understood as a **multidimensional phenomenon**. It can be associated with economic challenges, but it can equally represent aspiration, enterprise, education, professional development, family advancement, and community transformation. The developmental contribution of migration is particularly visible where migrants maintain productive relationships with their communities of origin. Nevertheless, the positive consequences of migration do not eliminate the risks associated with irregular or unsafe migration. Human trafficking, exploitation, fraudulent employment arrangements, dangerous journeys, drug trafficking, prostitution, and other forms of abuse remain serious concerns. The appropriate response, therefore, is not to discourage migration generally but to promote **safe, lawful, informed, ethical, and productive migration**. Religious institutions, traditional leaders, families, educational institutions, government agencies, and community organizations can play important roles in educating prospective migrants about both the opportunities and risks associated with migration.

Overall, the result of the study demonstrates that the high prevalence of migration in South-Eastern Nigeria reflects the strong mobility and adaptive capacity of the Igbo people. More importantly, the study indicates that migration has contributed to the welfare of many families and has provided financial, educational, entrepreneurial, religious, and infrastructural benefits to communities in Igboland. Thus, within an Igbo religious and cultural perspective, migration can be understood not only as movement from one geographical location to another but also as a strategy for individual advancement and a potential instrument of family and community development.

Recommendations

In order to restore the past glory of Igbo land and reduce illegal migrations:

1. The Federal Government (FG) should address the root cause of high quest for migration which has high effect on our culture.
2. The FG should also commence the revival of cultural festivals which will attract Nigerians in diaspora to come home.

3. Although employment opportunities can arise following the successful development of the Nigerian state, there should be conscious efforts to create and make employment opportunities accessible to the current teeming youths in the country.

Conclusion

The major reason for this migration trend has been for economic betterment. Majority of Igbo people who succeed in making such journey never desire to come back to Nigeria. The vast majority of migrants who even make efforts to come back home to Africa have never returned the same. Many once back home neglect every orientation they had about their villages prior to migration. This paper thus concludes that in order to checkmate migration, African leaders should fight corruption and embrace development.

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