

# Historiography of Igbo Migrations and Diaspora

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## Abstract

Migration is a universal phenomenon in the history of mankind as people have continued to move from one place to another perhaps for some socio-political and economic reasons. It may appear on the surface that the search for explanations of migration, as a social process, is a search for the obvious, yet historians and scholars of migration studies are still struggling to arrive at a consensus on the explanation of this concept and its changing dimensions. As a social process, migration discourse requires more than just a peripheral examination. There is then a need to look at the various dimensions and trends associated with this phenomenon. It is apparent that most migrations in Africa, and to an extent the world, are usually explained on economic and political forces, yet there are other dimensions and reasons why people leave their homes for another. Migration discourse therefore must seek to explain three inter-related issues; why people leave their homes for another, how they identified and see themselves in their host societies, and most importantly, why this phenomenon is a recurrent one.

Historians have sought the explanation of migration using the *push* and *pull* factors.<sup>1</sup> The *push* postulates that there are detracting factors that pushes people away from their homelands to another. The *pull* factors are those attractions that draw prospective migrants to a place. These might be economic, environmental, political and other social issues. From the studies reviewed below, the major pattern of migration include the rural-urban, and Diaspora migrations. They could be classified as internal and external migration. Scholarship on Igbo and Nigerian migration has tended to focus on the 'why' of migration laying much emphasis on economic explanations of voluntary internal and external migrations in the area, thereby paying less attention, if at all, on forced migration. Some historians subscribe to the argument that people used the political disturbances in Nigeria as a subterfuge to achieve their economic and social desire to migrate to more developed societies. The discussions on Igbo and Nigerian migrations outside the country also changed from explanations and justifications of migration to issues like ethnic identity formation of Igbo and Nigerian groups at their host societies and Diaspora discourse.

This paper will examine migration dimension in Igboland, Nigeria and Africa in historical perspective and relate it to the contemporary global context. It argues that less attention has been paid to Igbo migration historiography on forced migrations especially the emigrants displaced as a result of political strife during and immediately after the Nigerian/Biafran war.

## 1. Emergent Debate on Igbo Migration and Diaspora

Dmitri Van den Bersselaar's "Imagining Home; Migration and the Igbo Village in Colonial Nigeria" introduces the argument among historians on the explanation for the rate of Igbo migration. The prevailing argument had tended towards economic consideration as the driving force of Igbo migration. In this study, Dmitri examines the social dimension to the argument on reason of migration among the people. He presented the perception of Igbo migrants by the hometown dwellers and the relationship that existed between them in the mid twentieth century. He focused the study on urban igbo migrants who formed hometown association which they used for the development of their homeland during the colonial period. He positioned that Igbo migrants used this as an avenue to acquire influence in their various villages<sup>2</sup> He argued that migration is perceived by young Igbo people and a proof of social status.<sup>3</sup>He regarded this as "constructing diasporic public sphere and a framework

<sup>1</sup> Chukwuemeka Onwubu, *Ethnic Identity, Political Integration and national Development, The Igbo Diaspora in Nigeria*", *Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 18. No.3.1973..403

<sup>2</sup> Dmitri Van Dan Bersselaar, "Imaginning Home: Migration and the Igbo village in colonial Nigeria", *The Journal of African History*, Vol. 46, No. 1.2005.51

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.,63.

within which to re-imagine Igbo villages”.<sup>4</sup> Though Dmitri’s focus on this article is on Igbo migrations from their villages to colonial townships, his argument is quite interesting to the understanding of both internal and transnational migration of Igbo people. By looking at the migrant’s formation of ethnic associations abroad, Dmitri explored their contribution to the development of their homelands. His explanation thus introduces a social dimension to the debate on igbo migration. This demonstrates the social importance of abroad-based Igbo. To quote him, “Igbo migrants attempted to achieve social status and influence in their villages”.<sup>5</sup> Dmitri believes that migration is a display and a thing of pride in Igbo traditional societies to be regarded as being ‘abroad’.

Dmitri agreed with historians on economic dimension of Igbo migration, but stressed that the social aspect underscores the Igbo social character which reflects on their migration pattern. In his explanation, the colonial introduction of efficient transportation system, especially the railway, was a propelling factor to the rush to the urban cities in search of employment opportunities.<sup>6</sup>

Dmitri, however, draws the attention of historians to the relationship between economic pursuit and social character which historians tend to overlook. He argued that the social benefits; pride, respect and privileges which Igbo in abroad enjoys forms an explanation for the growing rate of migration among the people. He further identified population density of Igboland as another factor that forced the people to other places.<sup>7</sup>

There is no doubt that this perspective contributed to the question of the validity of economic explanation as a central factor in Igbo migration discourse. Perhaps historians had tried to look at other explanations. Nonetheless, this study merely concern itself with the “why” question to Igbo migration. One would have expected Dmitri to focus this study on the pattern that Igbo migration had taken over time. It is not surprising for historians to query this proposition, especially on the ground of his discipline- Anthropology. But his long stay in Igboland gives him credence to this position.

Contributing to the debate on the explanation of igbo migration, Udoaku Ola in his article, “The Socio-economic basis of a Diaspora Community”, disagrees with Dmitri’s proposition. He rather subscribes to the educational inclination of the igbo people as a factor to their migration during and after the colonial period. He stressed the place of education as a social factor in ‘pulling’ Igbo to urban centers and outside the country. He asserts that the opportunities which colonial education brought to the people was quite significant which the Igbo people were quick to take hold of. This, to him, was the reason why Igbo people were mostly clerical officers to the British colonial administration and were visible in the civil service across the country. He justified his position by explaining how Igbo families that were relatively well off, sponsored their children to study abroad. Some clan groups also combined their efforts to send their ‘illustrious sons’ abroad for further studies. The study displayed Igbo traditional societies and the quest for knowledge which was instrumental in the migration pattern. However, Ola’s argument suggests a departure from the prevalent economic explanation as most historians had postulated that Igbo people are ‘adventurous and inclined to commercial tendencies.’<sup>8</sup> This became a point of controversy on the social character of Igbo people. How could these two issues, love for knowledge and commercial inclination be reconciled? His argument and Dimtri’s position all emphasized social dimension, though the perspectives differ.

He identified four stages in Igbo migration history where he noted other explanations and dimensions of his argument.<sup>9</sup> The first stage was the traditional rural migration where people moved for better economic opportunity, especially with agriculture. Ola postulated that this stage spanned till the advent of colonial period. The second is the rural to urban migration that took place with the infrastructural improvement experienced with the advent of colonial administration. This enabled people to move from one place to another with the help of improved transportation. Ola’s argument on these two stages is on economic dimension of Igbo migration.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.,53.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.,53

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.,55

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.,57.

<sup>8</sup> Amosi, Odi. “The Igbo In Diaspora; The binding Force of Information,” *Liberties and Cultures*, Vol.34,No.2.(Spring 1999) 157.

<sup>9</sup> Udoaku, Ola. “The Socio- economic basis of a Diaspora Community; Igbo bu ike”, *Review of African Political Economy*, Vol.29, No.92.2002.303-306.

Though he observed this phenomenon, he spent less time on it, no doubt, because economic explanations of Igbo migration appear over studied in the historiography.

The third stage of his postulation of Igbo migration was different and most significant. Ola raised three important issues of Igbo migration in this stage. According to him, the stage started during and immediately after the Nigerian/Biafran war of 1967-1970. He believe this to be the period of forced migration, the period of ethnic dimension to migration and the period of increased Igbo diaspora. He emphasized what he call “ethnic cleansing of the Igbo people” which happened with the years of Nigeria’s political independence to the beginning of the civil war as a defining moment of Igbo migration.<sup>10</sup> It is his opinion that the killing of Igbo at other parts of the country forced them to migrate to neighboring West African countries and to some extent to advanced countries. Ola’s concern of this study is not a discourse on the effects of the civil war on the people but on how the unbearable conditions both at home and elsewhere in the country propelled them to increased migration. He posited that Igbo students abroad also found the situation back home unsafe for them thereby decided to stay back. He explained that this was the reason why so many Igbo professional are seen abroad. Ola’s view of forced migration among Igbo people tends to present them as victims of political crisis. His interpretation points to the direction of organized migration which might be misleading. This perspective lacks some insight on the dimension of the migration of displaced Igbo.

The fourth stage presented by Ola demonstrates his perception of group identity and diaspora. He explained that this stage, which started from the 1980s, introduced a deeper connection between Igbo abroad and their homelands. Ola calls this “the era of diaspora”<sup>11</sup> A factor prominent in this period was the loss of hope in the country not just with Igbo people but the entire nation. He argued that the collapse of the economy was instrumental in the decision to leave. The role of home town improvement Association became prevalent during this period. He pointed out two principal responsibilities which these associations performed. They took the responsibility of seeing to the welfare of their members in diaspora and also commit themselves to the development of their various hometowns.<sup>12</sup> This interpretation of the stages introduces a shift in Igbo historical discourse from justifications and reasons for Igbo migration to the activities of the migrants in their host communities. Various historical studies in this dimension thus attempt to examine how the Igbo diaspora were able to achieve communal identity. Other studies also looked at the activities of the Igbo association and their role in development of Igbo homeland. In his words, “Igbo seem more concerned with the local issues of home town politics than other wider issues”.<sup>13</sup>

The argument among historians on what constitute diaspora will be discussed with the presentation by Khalid Koser on the concept on a wider African context, which also applies to Igbo people.

Ola further identified two generations of Igbo diaspora to drive home his argument.<sup>14</sup> The first is the category of Igbo diaspora who still battles with issues of immigration, employment challenges and matters of adaptation. The second generation are those who had established themselves and are concerned with matters of group identity and the relationship with the Igbo homeland.

This interpretation is significant in that it discussed the concern of historians on the dispersion of Igbo people in large number in late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. The argument presents an agreement among historians on the role and importance of Igbo groups and association in diaspora not just to the development of Igbo homeland , but also as a factor in later migration of people at home. Hence, the view evaluates the developments that influence and affect the Igbo diaspora in both national and the world at large.

Amosi Odi in “Igbo Diaspora; the binding force of information” agree with Ola on the explanation of Igbo diaspora but emphasized that economic interest superseded every other in Igbo migration He described the Igbo as being “among the most dispersed in Africa and perhaps the world”.<sup>15</sup>He argued that their tendency towards

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<sup>10</sup> Udoaku, Ola. “The Socio- economic basis of a Diaspora Community; Igbo bu ike”, *Review of African Political Economy*, Vol.29, No.92.2002.304

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.,306.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.,304.

<sup>13</sup> Ola, ‘The socio-economic’304

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.,305

<sup>15</sup> Amosi, Odi. “The Igbo In Diaspora; The binding Force of Information,” *Liberties and Cultures*, Vol.34,No.2.(Spring 1999).159.

materialism created in them a sense of adventure.<sup>16</sup> Thus they seize every economic opportunity both within and outside Nigeria. He argued that Igbo commercial ingenuity explained their visible presence outside their homelands. To him, the greatest pull for their migration is trade and economic opportunities.<sup>17</sup> He stated that the 1980s witnessed a increased urbanization in Nigeria which took many Igbo youths to urban centers. On the International level, he argued that the wealth of the developed nations, on the other hand was the attraction of most Igbo people in those countries.

Odi, perhaps makes an addition to economic explanation for Igbo migration, which as I stated earlier had received considerable historical attention. He perceives the Igbo diaspora as congregation of people whose economic interest structures their activities. However, it is an addition to the discourse on Igbo diaspora. This perspective presented the Igbo at the end of the civil war as a people that responded to the prevailing social and economic circumstances and utilized their adventurous spirit to find a way to escape and better their lots. Odi paid less attention to subject of identity formation in diaspora which he raised. He rather focused on a a discourse on economic instruments of communication and information within the diasporic communities.

On the other hand, Chukwuemeka Onwubu in “Ethnic Identity, political integration and National Development; the Igbo in Diaspora in Nigeria” examines another aspect of historical interest-ethnic identity. He represents historians who had discussed migration from ethnic dimension.. He argued Igbo migration as a conscious inclination towards ethnicity, which perhaps explained their cleaving together in Northern and Western parts of Nigeria. It is his argument that this tendency impeded the efforts at national integration and development. He buttressed this view by looking at the killing of Igbo at the various parts of Nigeria before and during the civil war. His position is that this was a consequence of migration and identification on ethnic grounds.<sup>18</sup> He observed that this inclination by Igbo migrants is not just experienced within Nigeria alone but is at other countries where they congregate. Onwubu agrees with Dmitri proposition on population pressure in Igboland as a factor in Igbo migration He posited that population density and shortage of land for commercial agriculture also accounted for the migration outside Igbo homeland.<sup>19</sup> He substantiated this argument by citing Onwuka Dike, a renowned Nigerian historian who suggested that the major determinant of migration in Igboland had been economic and population pressure.<sup>20</sup>

“The density of population, which was and still is a main feature of the igbo country was due in part to the ascension of ‘new blood men in the west’..... The most important factor conditioning Igbo history in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and in our own time is land hunger. Hence the Igbo pressing against limited land resources had of necessity to seek other avenues of livelihood outside their own ethnic homeland”<sup>21</sup>

Onwubu demonstrates a level of agreement in historical presentation of Igbo migration. By focusing on the impact of ethnicity to migration, Onwubu has raised another dimension to historical reconstruction of migration not just for the Igbo people but for other multiethnic societies.

## 2. African Diaspora Discourse

It is pertinent at this juncture to shift the discussion from Igbo to trend in African general historical discourse. Khalid Koser in the introduction of the book, *New African Diaspora*, engaged in an examination of the concept of Diaspora and its application in African context. He maintains that there is a shift from the traditional understanding of diaspora in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century in African historiography. Before this time, discussion of diaspora tended to view it as the dispersal of African mostly to North America and Western Europe as a result of slave trade.<sup>22</sup> Other works also had included the descendants of the slaves who had settled especially in the United States.<sup>23</sup>

Koser asserts that the usage of diaspora among historians no longer depict the above but is applied to what he called “second wave of Africans in the west”.<sup>24</sup> He argued that the new African diaspora entails a discussion on voluntary migration of Africans as against the involuntary dispersion earlier upheld. In defining diaspora he

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 159

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.,160.

<sup>13</sup> Onwubu, ‘Ethnic Identity’ ,404.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.,405.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 404.

<sup>21</sup> Onwuka Dike Trade and politics in the Niger Delta ,26 cited in Chukwuemeka Onwubu, “Ethnic Identity” 404.

<sup>22</sup> Khalid Koser, “Introduction” *New African Diaspora (London; Routledge, 2003.)* 1

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.,2.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

quoted Shelfer, who posited that “Modern diasporas are ethnic groups of migrants who resides and act in the host countries, but maintain a strong sentiment and material links with their countries of origin and their homelands”.<sup>25</sup> However, his position is concerned on how Africa is conceptualized in relation to its diaspora and how the diaspora see themselves. This conceptualization seems generally agreed in historical discourse in Africa. It reflects in general historiography of Igbo diaspora in Nigeria.

Similarly, Amadu Lucky Kaba introduces the final issues of this paper’s discussion in his work, “African Migration, Brain Drain: Factors contributing to the Mass emigration of Africa’s Elite to the west”. He highlighted these factors to include; political conflicts, quest for material advantages and professional dissatisfaction.<sup>26</sup> He structured his argument on the loss of professional and skilled human resources of Africa to developed countries. Thus, he opined that the development sectors of African economy are abandoned and understaffed.<sup>27</sup> His argument thus is that “Africa is indirectly sponsoring developed countries”.<sup>28</sup> This issue has received considerable attention not just by historians but in contemporary social migration studies. This observation is significant to the understanding of Igbo and Nigerian historiography which explains the increasing rate of this phenomenon. He further advanced that most African migrants to developed word who migrated for educational pursuits had however settled there causing Africa several loss in its human investments.

### 3. Conclusion

In conclusion, what I have tried to do in this paper is an attempt at synthesizing the arguments among historians on the rationale, pattern, issues and trends in Igbo migration. The first issue dealt on the reasons for Igbo migration. Although most historical studies present economic explanations, the presentations of Dmitri and Ola demonstrates the importance of looking at social factors. Dmitri see Igbo migration as efforts to acquire influence and status displayed at their villages. This argument seems so unpopular, yet it represents a departure from the economic dimension. Other social factors discussed include population density of Igboland and Igbo quest for education. Onwubu and Ola appear to agree on the above propositions. However, the issue of migrant’s role to the development of the homeland undoubtedly was a common factor in the discourse. Brain drain and diaspora conceptualization constitute a shift of the historiography to African and world context. These issues are quite similar with the trend in global migration. Nonetheless, forced migration resulting from political crises had not received deserved attention in Igbo and Nigerian migration historiography. Thus, there exist a gap in knowledge on issues and patterns of migration of Igbo people who were economically displaced and politically persecuted immediately after the war. The exodus of this people to “new Home in North America, Canada to be precise forms the intension of the present study.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>26</sup> Amodu, Lucky Kaba. “Africa’s Migration Brain Drain; Factors Contributing to the Mass Emigration of Africa’s Elite to the west” in Okpewho, Isidore. *The New African Diaspora*. Bloomington: Indiana University press, 2009.115.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.,113.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.,115.