



Article

African diaspora and Development: The impact of Igbo diaspora associational groups on Igbo and American societies

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Abstract

The Igbo ethnic group is among the most dispersed in Africa and one of the nationalities in the Sub-Saharan that has penchant and pedigree for migration. The Igbo believe in social mobility. In a limited land space and in diminishing land resources, they have cause to struggle for a living outside their environment. Their passionate drive for entrepreneurship and adventurism makes them amenable to 'Diaspora' life. The paper argues that in spite of Igbo man's adaptability to new environment, he is always conscious of his ancestral roots which find expression in the formation of cultural associations outside their homeland. The association essentially serve as a connect between the home front and the Diaspora. The paper identifies many but mainly two Igbo associations in the United States that have in the past one decade been instrumental in the propagation of Igbo cultural heritage in the United States. These two associations are, the World Igbo Congress (WIC) and the 'Ekwe Nche' Organisation. The paper tends to explore the background to the formation of these associations, their composition, structure, objectives and roles in the development of Igbo and American Societies.

Keywords: Diaspora, Migration, Ethnic association, Development.

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Introduction

Since the last five decades when most countries in Africa gained their independence, that is, political freedom from the colonial masters, African citizens have been compelled by various circumstances to seek refuge in other parts of the world through migration. Given the fragile nature of most of the African States, characterised by weak, ineffective, and unstable political institutions and bad governance, leading to pervasive corruption, poverty, low levels of economic growth and development, lack of fiscal capacity to discharge basic functions of statehood, people are forced to migrate, to other continents where they will enjoy relative peace and basic necessities of life. As Imansuangbon (2011) points out: the contemporary reality of the character of the Nigerian State is nothing but a far cry from the yearnings and aspirations of the people. Besides its fragility, the Nigerian State has been variously described as 'weak', 'failing', 'over-bloated', and a 'soft' State in the light of international development benchmarks.

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The Nigerian State has so far not been able to build an appreciable degree of confidence among its citizenry and groups, manage the economy in the interest of the people or construct the much needed platforms of inclusion, tolerance and participation (Ihonobere, 1999). As a result, people begin to feel that their future is bleak as long as they desire to remain in the country.

This paper is subdivided into six sections. The first section is the introduction; the second section explores the origin and evolution of African Diaspora and migration. The third section identifies Igbo associational groups in America while the fourth section examines the background to the formation of World Igbo Congress (WIC) and Ekwe Nche Organisation, their objectives and membership and their impact on Igbo and American Societies. The fifth section is the conclusion.

The Origin and Evolution of African Diaspora and Migration

The African Diaspora was the movement of Africans and their descendants to places throughout the world, predominantly to the United States of America, and Europe. The term has been historically applied in particular to the descendants of the Africans who were enslaved and shipped to the Americas by way of the Atlantic slave trade. In modern times, the phenomenon is applied to Africans who have emigrated from the continent in order to seek education, employment and better living. According to Jeter (2003:3), African Diaspora can be analysed into three distinct phases: the first phase was those captured or sold to American merchants, the second phase was those that willingly decided to migrate to the United States and Europe in search of equality and the concomitant respect and dignity that equality bestows. The third phase places premium on organised and institutional cooperation between Africa and the Diaspora.

The first phase of African Diaspora stresses that from the 1500s to the 1800s, millions of Africans were brought to the New World and called slaves. These Africans were forcefully taken away from their shores under the most dehumanizing conditions. Though millions died in the process, many survived and adapted to the cultures of the New World. Historical records show that the Igbos were the greatest number of people in the Sub-Sahara Africa sold to Europe, and North America during the era of slave trade. Igbo slaves were known for being rebellious and having a high count of suicide in defiance of slavery. They were most numerous in the States of Maryland (Coincidentally where there is a predominant population of recent Igbo immigrants) and Virginia. Chambers (2005) holds that out of about 37,000 Africans that arrived in Virginia from Calabar in the 18th Century, 30,000 were Igbo. However, the case of Olaudah Equiano was a different one. He represents that indomitable Igbo Spirit which enabled Ndigbo at home and in the Diaspora to achieve greatness in spite of major odds and difficulties. At the age of 11, Equiano was kidnapped along with his sister on their way to the Delta. He was later separated from his sister and sold into slavery. He survived the long and tedious sea journey to the Southern States of the America but was later sold to a planter in the West Indies where he toiled as a slave in slave ships. Due to his doggedness, courage and determination, he devised methods of overcoming his problems. At the age of 19, he had saved enough money to buy his freedom from slavery. He travelled all over the West Indies and Central America as a merchant seaman and later moved on to settle in England where he joined the struggle to abolish slavery (Irukwu 2004:8-9).

The second phase of African Diaspora is traceable to the political imbroglio and trajectories that characterised most African States-persistent conflicts, bad governance, autocratic rule and dictatorial regimes that violently trampled upon human, social and political rights (Babatunde 2008:16). The life

threatening political and economic conditions in Africa contribute enormously to the massive exodus of both highly qualified and lowly educated populations in Africa. Thus, it has been argued that about 300,000 highly qualified Africans have left the Continent of Africa since 1990 (Babatunde, Ibid, 17). Kukah (2006:21) captured the scenario thus: *'As more and more immigrants flocked to the United States, the nation began to pride itself as being the melting pot of world cultures. Everyone was free to come into the United States, and no matter the nature of your cultural baggage, the country was elastic enough to accommodate it'*.

Adefusika (2010:2) argued that the mass departure of Africa's intellectuals and skilled population to western nations has been one of the greatest obstacles to the development of the Continent. Nigeria in particular is suffering from the shortage of professionals and skilful individuals necessary for the advancement of the nation's capital. The cause of this is tied mainly to internal and external factors. The former refers to lack of jobs, low wages, unsatisfactory living and working conditions, limited career opportunities while the latter emphasises social security, flexible career paths, high pay and satisfactory living and working conditions (Mohamoud 2005:20). Migration, both internal and international is a common feature of both developing and developed countries; it is also associated with development, urbanization or the forced movement of people fleeing from violent conflict or national disaster. There are many theories explaining the concept of Migration (Crisp, 1999; Russell, 2002; Taylor 2000; Usher, 2005; Nwajiuba, 2005). It has been argued that migration and globalization represent two of the most dynamic global socio-political trends of our time. While both have their own driving dynamics, they are highly interrelated. But globalisation has an ambivalent and somewhat contradictory influence on the current migration flows. It creates situations and conditions which increase the pressure and tendency that make individuals have the desire to migrate. Thus, it is a decentred and reflexive process characterized by links and cultural flows which work in a multi-dimensional ways (Rosenau, 1997). The cause of migration can also be viewed from the prism of relative deprivation and world systems. Relative deprivation theory states that awareness of the income difference between neighbours is an important factor in migration. The incentive to migrate is a lot higher in areas that have a high level of economic inequality. World Systems on the other hand, looks at migration from a global perspective. It expresses that interaction between different Societies can be an essential factor in social change within societies. For instance, trade between countries can stimulate the desire to migrate to a country with a more vibrant economy (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human_migration).

Mohamoud (2009:4) contends that the Africa Diaspora are the key strategic agents making the nexus between migration and development a reality. This advantage enables Diaspora communities to build up vast transnational networks (criss-crossing countries and continents) linking the process of globalization to the local conditions of their respective countries of origin. Diaspora communities transfer information, innovative ideas, intellectual capacities, new technological skills, peace-making tools and techniques, and democratic political habits and practices from the West to Africa. The understanding, however, is that these non-financial flows may have more profound impacts on the attitudes of Society vis-a-vis the perception of freedom, tolerance of differences, human right issues, governance and political practices in the homelands.

In view of the foregoing, Babatunde (2008:27) and Mohamoud (2007:332-377) argue that the African Diaspora which the African Union (AU) now refers to as "Africa's Sixth Region" is strategically placed in the global political economy to provide a vital links between the developed world and Africa. It

remains the greatest offshore asset of the African continent in view of its considerable human and financial resources potential that needs to be harnessed for the overall benefit of the continent.

But the question is, must Africans migrate to the West under false consciousness and foul impression? Many Africans migrate to Europe under the guise of seeking asylum and claiming that their countries are at war. In some cases, it is true and in some, it is not true but mere alibi. To be precise, Feyisetan (2009:221) submitted that Nigeria was listed among the top 10 countries seeking asylum in Europe and America. In Italy, 2008, there were 5,333 new asylum seekers from Nigeria. In the same year, 970 Nigerians sought asylum in the United Kingdom, 765 in Canada, 801 in Spain, 500 in Germany, 535 in Austria, 746 in Greece, 436 in Norway, 223 in Malta and 988 in Switzerland. The attendant consequence of all this is the gradual killing of the 'hens that lay the golden eggs', the mass departure of Africa's intellectual and skilled population to western nations—'Brain-Drain'.

Igbo Associational Groups in America

America, popularly known as the 'God's own State' is remarkable for 'cultural assimilation'. Assimilation is a general term for a process that can follow a number of different pathways. It is seen as a benign, egalitarian process that emphasises sharing and inclusion. In view of this, the United States is viewed as a melting pot, a process in which different groups come together and contribute in roughly equal measures to create a common culture and a new, unique Society. Besides, Americanisation has also been a pre-condition for access to better jobs, higher education and other opportunities. To a significant extent, migrants particularly African-Americans have cause to give up their traditions and adopt Anglo-American culture. This has led to conflict of interest, anxiety, demoralisation and resentment in many groups of Diaspora in the United States (Abrahamson, 1980:152-154; Schlesinger, 1992:28; Healey, 1998:36-37). The Nigerian-Americans, particularly the Igbo ethnic group is one of the groups that never allowed the American culture to overwhelm and dominate it totally.

The Igbo ethnic group is among the most dispersed in Africa and one of the nationalities in the Sub-Saharan that has penchant and pedigree for migration. The Society believes in social mobility. Confronted with internal challenges occasioned by land hunger, impoverished soil and population pressures and coupled with the thirty months of civil war that devastated and traumatised the group, the people had cause to struggle for a living outside their immediate environment. As stated elsewhere, their passionate drive and dogged determination to fully exploit new environments makes them amenable to Diaspora life. In their enterprising spirit and aggressive individualism and taking advantage of the free mobility of people, the free enterprise system and the peace and security afforded by the modern government, they move out of their 'forest home' to establish themselves in various professions. To this end, the people are inclined to form ethnic associations. The purpose is partly to share sense of common ties and cultural norms and partly to assist in developing the home front community development. Some of these associations in Nigeria include, Ohanaeze Ndigbo, Aka Ikenga, Mkpoko Igbo, Eastern Mandate Union, Odenigbo Forum, Igbo National Assembly, Ndigbo Liberation Forum, Igbo Youth Council. The quantum of these platforms is not unconnected to the resolution of the Igbo Question in Nigeria. Though some of these associations have died naturally, others are still active.

The United States of America is a country where more of Igbo Diaspora are found. In other words, comparatively, the Igbo feel more comfortable in the United States than other countries in Europe or North America. The reason for this may not be far-fetched. The Igbo political culture tends to be synonymous with that of the United States. For instance, the concepts of egalitarianism and republicanism

which are the hallmark of Igbo political culture are also the bedrock of the American political culture. Both concepts (egalitarianism and republicanism) denote 'unencumbered self, individual mindedness, liberality, freedom, equality. As Nwankwo (2005:165) captures it: Republican consciousness is enriching in its appeal because it feeds on the individuality of semi-connected passions. While allowing for the interflow of corporate images, it however achieves significance primarily on the basis that each and every component of the whole reposes the competences of self-expression and self-actualization. Buttressing this, Achebe remarks: 'at the root of all is that very belief in the fundamental worth and independence of every man and his right to speak on matters of concern to him, and, flowing from it, a rejection of any form of absolutism which might endanger those values' (Ojmrnah, 1991:29).

Studies indicate that among the peoples and tribes captured by the American merchants during the Atlantic slave trade between 1451 and 1870 were the Igbos. While some of them succumbed to the dehumanizing conditions of the period, some committed suicide in the process. Suffice it to say that the descendants of the Igbo ex-slaves coupled with the Igbos that willingly migrated to the United States deemed it proper to aggregate to form a common front primarily to propagate Igbo cultural heritage in America and also to chart a course for developing their homeland. Having experienced the two worlds or two (identities) citizenships, in their humanness, they have remained Igbo-African by retaining as much as they could of Igbo worldview. They have as well aligned their ways of lives to the ways of their host nation, making significant contributions to the development of the Igbo Society (Jeter, 2003:13-14). Hence, the proliferation of various Igbo associations in the United States of America. The associations criss-crossed the States that comprised mainly the South east geo-political zone and part of the Delta State that constitute the Igbo speaking. The associations include:

Igwebuikwe of Worcester, Orlu Regional Assembly, Abiriba, USA, Ohuhu Development Union, Olokoro Development Union, Awka Union, USA, Nnewi Union, Atlanta, Umunachi Community Association, Obowu Water for Amuzi, Ozuitem, USA, Igbo Union of Washington State, True Igbo Youth Solidarity Movement, Igbo Organization, New York, Arondizuogu Patriotic Union, New Jersey, Igbo Charitable Association, Rediscovering our lost Igbo Brethren, Abia State Association, Asaba Progressive Front, Igbo of Oruifite. Others are:

- Igbo Union of Washington State
- Igbo Development Union, Sacramento, USA
- Umunne Cultural Association of Minnesota
- Odoziobodo Club of Ogwashi-uku
- Ogbaru USA Association
- Ogidi Association
- All Aro USA
- World Igbo Congress Foundation
- Ahlara Development Union
- Igbo People's Congress, Houston
- Igbo Cultural Association of Southern California
- Igbo Association of South Florida
- Igbo bu Igbo, New Jersey
- Igbo Community Association of Nigeria, Dallas

- Ekwe Nche Organisation
- Umunna Association, Chicago

The common denominator here is the projection and propagation of Igbo Cultural heritage and an avenue by which the associations contribute positively in the development of Igboland.

The Impact of World Igbo Congress and Ekwe Nche Organisation on Contemporary Igbo Society

World Igbo Congress (WIC) took off in 1994 in Houston, Texas, in the United States of America essentially to serve as a credible and unified voice for Ndigbo in America. The idea was initiated by Ken Okorie with the support of other personalities like J. O. S. Okeke, Lucius Akuchie, Charles Onyirimba, Nwachukwu Anakwenze, Richard Nwachukwu, Ejike Nibo, Boniface Ezechukwu, Ebube Odunukwe and George Udeozor (Ugorji, 2006). In a general sense, WIC was formed as a 501 (C) 3 Organisation to address salient and critical issues that bother on Igbo interest and consciousness particularly in respect of projects (educational, scientific, charitable, economic, agricultural, cultural and infrastructural) and fund raising.

The specific objectives of the WIC include:

- (i) To unify Ndigbo in the United States;
- (ii) To promote, protect and advance Igbo culture and civilization;
- (iii) To promote and cultivate political awareness and civic responsibility among Ndigbo;
- (iv) To promote the advancement and welfare of Ndigbo;
- (v) To promote harmony and peaceful co-existence with other ethnic groups;
- (vi) To receive, invest and disburse funds, and hold property for the purpose of the corporation, and;
- (vii) To conduct other activities, not in contravention of the Texas non-profit corporation or Article six of the Articles of Incorporation necessary or appropriate to carry out the foregoing purposes.

Membership of WIC is open to all Igbo persons through membership in local Igbo community organisations. However, members of the general public can also be admitted through becoming partners, sponsors and supporters. The most significant annual event of the congress is its convention. The event is rotated around the States that comprised the United States of America.

In similar vein, 'Ekwe Nche Organisation was established in 1996 in Chicago, United States of America to address the precarious State of the Igbo nation. 'Ekwe Nche' is an Igbo concept that depicts a 'Clarion Call'. In 1998, the organisation applied for non-profit status and on the 13th of August, 1999, the application was approved, thus, making it a recognised non-profit organisation in America. The mission of the organisation is contained in Article four of the Articles of Incorporation of Ekwe Nche. It includes:

- (i) To worship Almighty God in accordance with Igbo culture and tradition;
- (ii) To promote the religious, cultural, educational, civic, literary, economic, scientific and advancement of Igbo people worldwide;
- (iii) To conduct research /in order to facilitate the accurate dissemination of information to be used to actively stop all forms and acts of genocide perpetrated and/or engaged upon Igbo people worldwide;

- (iv) To forge intellectual links and networks with scholars, policy-makers and activists within and outside Nigeria;
- (v) To participate actively and collaboratively in continental and global debates with interested organisations in Nigeria, the United States and other countries on issues specifically relevant or related to Igbo Studies (Igbo Studies Association, 2004).

The organisation is made up of Igbos and their descendants from all parts of the world, including the United States, Cuba, Jamaica, the West Indies and other Caribbean Countries (http://www.biafranland.com/ibo_reunification_train_rolls_on.htm).

Ideologically, World Igbo Congress is a progressive organisation while Ekwe Nche Organisation tends towards radicalism in its approach. Though both aim at repositioning and reengineering the contours of Igbo Society vis-a-vis politics, economy and culture, their modus operandi are quite distinct. While WIC adopts a gradual and progressive change in line with the Ohanaeze Ndigbo socio-cultural organisation's pattern, Ekwe Nche Organisation is more of a revolutionary, confrontational and radical like the movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB).

Ekwe Nche Organisation is a strong advocate of Biafran ideology and the secessionist bid in contrast to World Igbo Congress belief. Ekwe Nche argues that the Igbo can break away from the "pariah" status imposed on them, and they can redirect their creativity and indomitable will-power towards common goals: developing their own state, as did the Jewish survivors of the holocaust when they took possession of their Holy Land. Biafra will be a pride of the world. They only need a chance to manage their own affairs without outside intervention. They also need to quit a federation which has been imposed on them by the colonial power and which is structured in a way that it cannot advance their well-being. In the words of Uwazuruike (2000):

Nothing good can ever come out of Nigeria. What you hear are power outages, shortage of water, armed robbery and other evils. We don't want to be part of that evil. Biafra has all the resources—our scientists are scattered all over the world, they will come back. I tell you, in the first two years of Biafra, we shall be manufacturing nuclear weapons.

Perhaps, it is in the light of this that Nwakanma (2007) remarked that, left alone, the Igbo would soar to the stars. Nigeria has almost destroyed the Igbo dream. Nwankwo (1996) also lend credence to this when he opined that, 'identity as a product of consciousness in the context of affirmation relates to the degree to which an ethnic formation realizes its inherent and manifest possibilities, and the extent to which this could be utilized for self perpetuation and preservation'. World Igbo Congress, in its mild, gradual but consistent approach in tackling the woes and throes of the Igbo nation during and after the Nigerian civil war believes that despite the fact that the Igbo have been badly battered, humiliated, demoralized and politically short-changed by successive Nigerian governments, it is poised to continue to promote Igbo unity and to present a common front to fight the course of Ndigbo and to ensure that they attain and maintain their own rightful position and stature in the Nigerian enterprise.

Obviously, members of both organisations (WIC and Ekwe Nche) have been very instrumental in the development of the south-eastern Nigeria particularly in the areas of promoting Igbo Language, culture, and health care services. The organisations contend that the growing decay of Igbo language is indeed the most disturbing aspect of the eclipse of the Igbo psyche. The Igbo nation has already lost a large and growing number of youths of Igbo parentage who are brought up entirely in a foreign language. These

people may not be regarded as true Igbos because of the deficiency in Igbo language and their unacquainted with the culture emanating from it. Culture is essentially an emanation from, a product of language (Nwabueze, 2001). To address this problem, World Igbo Congress in its convention held at Enugu in 2004 proposed that there was need to trace the origin of the Igbo as that would be a precondition to tackling the prevailing problem. It also intended to establish an educational linkage between Igbo-Nigeria and Igbo-America where Igbo language and culture would be inculcated in Igbo children in America.

In view of this, the use of the Igbo language during events and meetings of the World Igbo Congress has been an important aspect of the history of the Organisations. For instance, in 2002, Chief Mike Ahamba became the first speaker to present a paper entirely in the Igbo language, when he delivered "Agwo no n'akirika: Onye ga egbu?" (there is a snake in a raffia, who will kill it (Ahamba, 2002). Importantly, in 2005, the Education and Youth Development Committee of WIC made efforts to product a CD of instructions on Igbo Language for beginners. Ugorji (2006) argued that religion (the deification of a people's history), motif (the icons, symbols) and ethos (distinguishing characters, sentiment, and beliefs of a people) are most evident in World Igbo Congress. He also opined that the dominating motif in WIC is Igbo Outfits for men and women. This finds explanation in the popular use of the Igbo traditional wear known as 'Isiagu'—the head of a lion in any WIC events in the United States.

Again, the establishment of the Igbo Farm Village at Staunton, Virginia, United States by the Igbo-Americans was remarkable. The village is a part of the American Frontier Culture museum of Virginia established to acknowledge the contributions of the Old World cultures to the development of American frontier culture. It is a tangible recognition of the Africans (especially those from West Africa) who, though were forced to migrate to the New World helped to build, promote, and populate what is now known as the United States of America right from the 1700s. The construction of the Igbo Farm Village provided the Igbo and African-American youth a once in lifetime opportunity to get a firsthand experience in the techniques of Igbo traditional architecture. In essence, the Igbo Farm Village, being an outdoor museum exhibit, provides a context very close to the Igbo cultural environment for experiencing and learning Igbo culture in America (Njoku, 2011).

Relatedly, Igbo associations in America particularly the Igbo Studies Association (ISA), World Igbo Congress (WIC) and Ekwe Nche Organization encouraged the establishment of an endowment fund (as a centre) for Igbo Studies at major Nigerian Universities. The centre focuses on the development and advancement of Igbo Studies in all its ramifications. The Associations also saw the need to maintain greater collaboration with institutions, groups and research centres within and outside the United States committed to the study and propagation of Igbo history, culture and civilisation (Igbo Studies Association, 2011).

They were also able to unify other national, state and local associations and made them to channel the contributions they make individually and collectively toward the general welfare and development of the American Society and Igbo nation in particular. They established Igbo Credit Union in the United States whose facilities and resources are used to promote and support the economy of their members. Additionally, World Igbo Congress often provides moral and financial support to the parent organisation at home, that is, the Ohanaeze Ndigbo Socio-Cultural Organisation. For instance, in 1995, it provided counsel and financial support to Igbo delegates to the National Constitutional Conference (NCC). In

2004, the congress organised a convention at Enugu that attracted a large population of Igbos of various shades. The aim was to chart a new course for the development of Igboland.

Conclusion

The paper attempted to examine the roles of the Igbo associational groups in Diaspora toward the development of Igbo cultural heritage in the United States of America. It identifies both the remote and immediate causes of Igbo migration to foreign lands. The paper particularly emphasised the robust contributions of the World Igbo Congress founded in Houston, Texas in 1994 and the Ekwe Nche Organisation formed in Chicago in 1996 toward the development of Igbo nation.

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