

The Effects of “Permanent Migration” on the Economy of Owerri Province, Eastern Nigeria, 1950-1967

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on internally generated economically motivated or modern migrations within Eastern Nigeria in the twentieth century, especially from 1950 to 1967 and its effects on the economy of Owerri Province. From the dawn of colonial rule in Nigeria, modern migration was characterized by rural-urban drift in diverse forms. It emerged as a consequence of the development of a money economy, which created employment opportunities in the new centres of development. During the period, migrant labour became coterminous with ‘wage’ labour because of the intrusion of people from the rural areas to the new centres of commerce for the purpose of wage employment. However, as from the end of the Second World War, “permanent migration” began to manifest in Eastern Nigeria in general and Owerri Province in particular. ‘Permanent migration’ denotes those migrants who left the rural areas and settled permanently in the towns, unlike the seasonal and short-term rural-urban migrants. Against this backdrop, this paper examines the causes, characteristics, factors that enhanced permanent migrations; and its effects on the economy of old Owerri Province. The paper adopts the thematic historical and eclectic methods and diverse sources of data in its analysis; and argues that activities of the ‘permanent migrants’ had both positive and adverse socio-economic effects on Owerri Province. It recommends proactive measures that if implemented could curtail ‘permanent migration’, which is still prevalent in current Imo State of Nigeria till date.

Keywords: Permanent migration, Owerri Province, Migrant labour, Rural-urban migration, Eastern Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Migration denotes any change of residence across an administrative boundary. It could be inter-ward, inter-state, inter-regional, or international.¹ Migration in pre-colonial Africa was based on groups, as there were cases of mass migration by communities, caused by political disputes, ethnic warfare, famine or natural disasters. However, the modern migratory trend, which is the focus of this paper, features primarily economically-motivated movements by individuals unlike group migrations that dominated pre-colonial Africa. The new migratory process began to manifest at the dawn of the twentieth century, - the beginning of colonial rule in many parts of Africa.²

The migratory process increased further in subsequent decades of the twentieth century. Colonial subjugation of indigenous societies across Africa led to a new lease of life and security was guaranteed to a large extent. Thus, existence of environment free from molestations became the major permissive factor in the change from group to individual-based migrations. Generally, modern migration was caused by three major factors: economic necessity, modernizing influence and political motivations; although economic motivation far out-weighs the other factors. Thus, series of economically motivated migrants left their

source areas across Igboland to various parts of Eastern Nigeria, especially to the urban centres during the period under review, 1950-1967. This category of workers often referred to as migrant labour is the focus of this paper.³

Furthermore, the major emphasis of this paper is rural-urban drifts which manifested in diverse forms: seasonal, short-term and permanent during the period under review. The rural-urban drift was associated with increased economic activities and the related phenomenon of urban growth, which became the main attraction of migrants. While the seasonal migrants stayed away from home for periods that lasted from five to eight months and returned to the rural areas; the short-term migrants worked for periods not longer than two years and returned to their rural base. On the other hand, permanent migrants were those who had left the rural areas and settled permanently in the towns. In most cases, members of their family joined them after they had stabilized in the towns. Cases of permanent migration began to manifest in many parts of Eastern Nigeria, particularly Owerri Province as from the end of World War II., but became well noticed as from the 1950s.⁴ The activities of permanent migrants from diverse rural communities, especially those from the old Owerri Province of Igboland in the urban centres of Port-Harcourt, Onitsha, Enugu, Aba and Calabar contributed to socio-economic growth in these towns during the period. However, by the time the Nigerian civil war began in 1967, these rural-urban migrants were compelled to return to their source area, where they found it very difficult to readjust to new social and economic activities of the period. Thus, the impact of these on the economy of Owerri Province in particular and Eastern Nigeria in general will be examined in this paper.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

For purpose of analysis, the theoretical framework of this paper will be based on two of the theories of migration: the economic theory of migration and the system approach to rural-urban migration. The economic theory of migration was propounded by Michael Todaro, in his study of “A model of labour migration”.⁵ He observes that individuals are motivated to migrate because of the prospects of better opportunities in the urban centres and the existing gap in real income between the city and the hinterlands. He concludes that migrants move to areas where they stand better chances of success in securing employment.

On the other hand, the system approach to the study of rural-urban migration in contemporary society was carried out by A. L. Mabogunje in 1970.⁶ He argues that the migratory process is influenced by social, political, technological and economic factors. Furthermore, he stresses that the individual’s social system and environment influence the migrant’s decision either to remain in the rural area or to embark on out-migration. Once in the city, the urban environment assists the migrant to adjust. His family and local community in the rural area constantly monitor his success or failure and this influences subsequent out-migrations from the country side to the cities

At this juncture, it is necessary to relate the two theories above to the migratory process during the period under review. Thus, both theories by Todaro and Mabogunje that emphasize economic theory of migration and system approach to rural-urban migration respectively are applicable to the migration process in Igboland during the period under review. No doubt, people from diverse areas in Igboland, particularly Old Owerri Province embarked on out-migrations to improve their economic conditions and the success of the returnee migrant on an occasional visits lured other migrants from the rural areas to search for employment in the major cities in Eastern Nigeria during the period under review.⁷

SOURCE AREA, DESTINATIONS AND CAUSES OF PERMANENT MIGRATION

Labour migration was a phenomenon across Igboland during the period under review as aptly observed by Walter Schwarz, who categorized all Igbo activities as migration.⁸ However, for purpose of analysis, the source area of migrant labour to be highlighted in this paper is old Owerri Province, with emphasis on the former Okigwe and Owerri districts, which form the current Imo State of Nigeria. Recall that Orlu was originally part of Okigwe district; as such, the source area also includes old Orlu division; by implication the area covered in this study (current Imo State) falls among the most densely populated regions in Africa.⁹ Thus, many communities in the source area embarked on permanent migrations to the major urban centres of Eastern Region of Nigeria: Enugu, Aba, Port-Harcourt, Onitsha and Calabar during the period under review. The impact of their activities mostly on the source areas is the main emphasis of this paper.

With regards to the causes of the out-migrations from Owerri Province, the major cause was geographical factors (as observed earlier). High population density led to overuse of the available land for agricultural purpose that led to infertility of the soil in most communities. Thus, A. G Hopkins described this part of Igboland as being food deficient, due to the fact that the population density was too great for self-sufficiency in food production to be possible.¹⁰ It has also been argued that it was the situation in this stretch of high population density zone that led to the idea of settling the population in parts of Cross River Districts of South-eastern Nigeria.¹¹ Thus, the dense population led to land hunger in most communities, as soil productivity declined after one or two years of cropping. Against this backdrop, a lot of able-bodied persons deserted traditional farming for other activities in the emerging urban centres of Eastern Nigeria.¹²

Other than the above, the socio-economic boom of post-World War II years also boosted the outmigration from the source area. The boom was partially as a result of surplus money in circulation brought about by the spend- thrift attitude of most de-mobilized ex-servicemen, whose gratuities and war allowances stimulated currency supply and circulation. The boom led to increase in building construction activities, to the extent that iron roofing was no longer a luxury in some villages in the source area.¹³ The above development had impact on many rural communities, as young persons who had little education seeing the manner the ex-servicemen displayed their wealth left for “better life” in the urban centres.¹⁴

Another contributory factor to rural –urban migration that led to permanent migration in the 1950s was the politically motivated decision of the indigenous National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroon (NCNC) led government in Earthen Nigeria to introduce the Universal Free Primary Education (UPE) scheme during the first quarter of 1957. By this action, the government of Eastern Nigeria directly emulated similar policy that was successfully implemented in Western Nigeria in 1955. However the resultant effect of the UPE scheme in Eastern Nigeria was a rise in the total enrolment into primary schools, from 725, 500 in 1953 to 1,209 200 in 1957, an increase of sixty- three percent.¹⁵

This led to increase in the cost of sustaining the education section: teachers’ salaries had to be paid, new schools constructed; text books and instructional materials had to be purchased etc. The above burden was overbearing on the government and the UPE scheme was abrogated just after one year of trial in 1958. Thus, the discontinuation of the scheme had adverse effects on the education sector in Eastern Nigeria, as a large percentage of those who enrolled in the UPE scheme dropped out of school due to lack of finance. Generally, the introduction of the scheme also led to high cost of sustaining the school system and a de-emphasis of the welfare of teachers, whose salaries were in arrears. The resultant effect was a mass exodus out of the teaching profession in the late 1950s. Accordingly, G. K. Helleiner observes that

“the semi-educated young people turned out by schools left the rural areas in droves to seek the sophistication of the cities.”¹⁶

Another factor that boosted the out-migrations from the source area was the emphasis laid on industrialization of Eastern Nigeria by the indigenous N.C.N.C led government of the region. Specifically, the government’s industrial policy was signed between the federal government of Nigeria, on one hand, and the Tunnel Portland Cement Company limited and P. L Smith and Company limited to establish a cement firm, the first integrated cement plant in West Africa. The cement firm was sited near a large line stone deposit in Nkalagu.¹⁷ No doubt, by the time the factory opened in 1957, it attracted a lot of migrant workers that included those from Owerri Province.¹⁸

Similarly, the industrial policy was enhanced in the early 1960s through the 1962-1968 Eastern Regional Development Plan, under the leadership of Dr. M. I. Okpara (the Premier of Eastern Region of Nigeria). The plan set aside 12 percent or £13.5 million of the total capital expenditure to develop manufacturing and processing industries. The result was that by 1964 the government of Eastern Nigeria had established many industries that included. Niger Steel Company Limited, Port-Harcourt, Eastern Enamelware Factory, Port-Harcourt, Aba Textile Mills Limited, Aba; Calabar Cement Company Limited, Calabar and Golden Guinness Breweries limited, Umuahia.¹⁹ In like manner, during the same period, the government surveyed and reviewed existing industries and prospective ones. It also appointed a Commission of Inquiry into small-scale industries in the region. This was the Kilby Commission, appointed in 1961 and conducted an industrial survey of Eastern Nigeria. The Commission concluded its survey in 1962 and identified 10,728 small scale industries in fourteen urban centres.²⁰

Other than the above, successive governments in Eastern Nigeria, as part of its industrial policy had encouraged Multi-national Corporations and foreign firms to establish branches of their businesses in the region. Consequently, the Nigeria Breweries Limited established a branch at Aba early in 1957. Branches of Unilever Limited and International Equitable Associated Limited (both manufacturers of soap and textiles) were also established at Aba in 1959. Similarly, the government of Eastern region signed an agreement with the Pepsi-cola International of United States of America for setting up a manufacturing plant for the production of soft drinks at Onitsha in 1959.²¹ No doubt, the foregoing developments created employment opportunities in the urban centres during the period. Consequently migrants from different parts of Eastern Nigeria, particularly Owerri Province (was split into three divisions: Owerri, Okigwe and Orlu in 1958) left their source area to the urban centres in search of wage employment in the new industries and large commercial enterprises.

URBAN GROWTH

By the early sixties, there were five major towns in Eastern Nigeria. A contributory factor to the growth of these towns was increase in their population brought about by the influx of migrants. For instance, the 1963 census figures of Aba, Port-Harcourt, Enugu, Onitsha and Calabar had nearly tripped those of 1953.²² Onitsha and Aba developed rapidly due to the existence of modern transport system in the two towns. Specifically, Aba, which may be regarded as the commercial nerve -centre of Igboland attained its status as a result of its location on the railway, which attracted diverse migrants as a result of flourishing commercial activities stimulated by the railway.

On its part, Onitsha owes its growth to the River Niger, which stimulated trade and road routes, being the major transit town connecting the old Eastern Region with the old Western Region. The existence of a large market in the town also attracted diverse migrants. Enugu

and Port-Harcourt originally came to limelight as a result of development of transport infrastructure. In the case of Enugu, economic activities commenced with the discovery of coal, which attracted wage earners. Furthermore, when the Eastern Railway reached Enugu, this triggered the movement of population from the traditional setting to the nucleus of the railways station. The urban setting attracted people, and the population of Enugu rose from mere 3,170 in 1921 to 60,000 in 1950.²³ In the case of Port-Harcourt, its early growth was due to its function as a port; which attracted migrant wage earners from diverse sections of Eastern Nigeria. Thus, its population increased from 79,634 in 1952 to 179,563 in 1963, which represents 8.7 percent per annum.

As can be seen in the foregoing analysis, these increase population of the major urban centers in Eastern Nigeria was mostly from the 1950s to the early sixties. These fall within the era of “permanent” migration, which is the focus of this study. Although, it can be argued that there were migrants from diverse background in these urban centers, no doubts those from Owerri Province was also part of the bulk. An informant asserted that he and his kinsmen were in these towns as permanent migrants during this period. While my informant was a migrant independent wage earner in Port-Harcourt, his friends were itinerant migrants traders in the other major towns in Eastern Nigeria during the period under review.²⁶

Many communities in our source area were involved in the permanent migrations to the urban centres in the fifties. For instance, the permanent migration to Enugu involved migrants from some communities in Owerri Division such as Ubomiri, Amaimo, Mbieri and Nekede. The number of these migrants increased by the fifties, to the extent that their presence become well noticeable in Enugu. They formed the Owerri Divisional Union in Enugu during the fifties, where attendance to their monthly meetings was often not less than 30 adult males.²⁷ These Owerri migrants jointly built an Owerri Provincial Hall at Ogui, which became the rallying point of Owerri indigenes resident in Enugu and its environs. The hall served as a meeting point for the monthly meetings of the Owerri Divisional Union, where problem of migrants were discussed and assistance rendered of those in need. Community development at home was one of the primary motives of the monthly gatherings. This was because the Owerri man in the town had “one leg in the town and the other leg at home”.²⁸

Worthy of mention here is the permanent migration to Port-Harcourt, where increased commercial activities attracted diverse migrants. E. Isichie observes that as time went on, immigrants flooded into the city, mainly from Owerri and Bende Divisions with a number from Onitsha and Orlu Divisions.²⁹ Among migrants to the city of Port-Harcourt in the 1950s were people from some communities in what was then Orsu Clan, in Orlu Division. The source communities were Amaebu, Awo-Idemili, Orsuiheteukwa, Umuhu; and their neighbours such as Amagu, Akuma and Uburu.³⁰ The migrants from these communities were mostly illiterates and semi-literates, and as such most of them took up menial jobs in the city of Port-Harcourt. Many were unable to save sufficient money to return home to “show-off” their wealth and as such stayed permanently in the town till the outbreak of the Nigerian civil crisis in 1966/67.

Other than migrants from the Orsu Clan to Port-Harcourt, there were earlier migrants from Owerri Division, who first came to Port-Harcourt in the 1930s; and by the 1950s witnessed the phenomenal growth of the city. The growth in the city of Port-Harcourt led to the emergence of the satellite town of Diobu. Migrants from Amaimo, Owerri Division were among the first settlers in Diobu. Some of them were quick to purchase land from the indigenous people at cheap prices. Some of the Amaimo migrants developed their plots of land; one of such was Chief Emenike, who was said to have acquired his land before the government’s formal development of Diobu as an area for settlement.³¹

In later years, up till the outbreak of the Nigerian civil war in 1967, the Diobu settlement expanded into three distinct locations: Mile I, II, and III. These locations became the home to migrants from Owerri Province. This led to the influence of the culture of the Owerri Igbo over the indigenous culture of the people. For instance, the Owerri Igbo dialect was freely spoken, while the indigenous Ikwere dialect was rarely spoken in commercial transactions within Port-Harcourt metropolis. Some houses in Port-Harcourt, especially the satellite town, Diobu belonged to the Owerri-Igbo migrants; and many streets were named after these 'landlords' from Owerri. The consequence was the domination of commercial activities, particularly petty trading in the early fifties, up till the mid-sixties by the Owerri-Igbo. Furthermore, they penetrated into other Ikwere communities in their quest for "wealth" before the outbreak of the Nigerian civil war in 1967.

CONCLUSION

This paper highlighted economically- motivated internal migrations within Eastern Nigeria, 1950-1967. The source area was the old Owerri Province (current Imo State of Nigeria) while the host areas were the major urban centres in Eastern Nigeria: Enugu, Aba, Port-Harcourt, Onitsha and Calabar, As observed in the paper, migrants were pulled by the availability of profitable employment opportunities in the cities, thereby justifying our theoretical framework that emphasized some of the theories of migration.

Generally, the out-migrations highlighted in this paper led to changes in some facets of lives of both the source area and the host urban centres. To the source area, permanent migration benefited some of the migrants through their cash savings and accumulated landed property; as some proportion of the capital saved was repatriated to the indigenous communities of migrants. Thus, some of the migrants utilized the money saved to build their own house at home, while some others paid the bride wealth of their spouses from such savings³²

As individual, some activities of the migrants affected rural areas for good. Some established economic projects in the rural areas, such as provision stores, beer parlour etc; just like the ones found in the towns. Migrants also played roles in the introduction of various innovations from the urban to the rural areas. For instance, some successful migrants sponsored the education of many relatives, thus developing the human resource of their respective communities.³³ Similarly, migrants, acted as agents of change by championing various community development projects in their respective communities; and also played key role in enlightening the rural masses on government programmes during the period.

Despite the above few positive effects on the source area, the out migrations had major adverse effects on the economy of the old Owerri Province (which later became Imo state). Generally, the continued stay of young persons in the towns affected the composition of rural labour force; the absence of young men rural left agricultural practice to women, children and the elderly. The take-over of agricultural practice by women led to predominance of cassava in most communities. Consequently, Marie-Angelique Savane argues elsewhere that this trend has led to excessive burden on women, who participated not only in subsistent and cash crop production, but also in reproductive labour.³⁴

In like manner, the out-migrations had adverse effects on post-independence government's agricultural innovations from being realized in Owerri Province. For instance, whereas most farmers in Ogoja and Calabar provinces had knowledge of the use of various cassava species very early in the 1960s, such knowledge only became widespread to farmers in Orlu division just in 1967, by which time migrants had been compelled by the outbreak of the civil to return to their once abandoned farmlands. The out-migrations also affected the rural handicraft and other allied services often rendered by men. For instance, wood carving and

cutting of palm fruits dwindled. Woodwork was also affected, for with the out-migration of men, activities in that sub-sector of the rural economy dwindled.

On the other hand, the migrations from Owerri province benefitted the host areas immensely. Migrants from the source area participated in the infrastructural development of the urban centres, such as road construction, railway maintenance, harbour maintenance and mining activities at the collieries in Enugu. Migrants also built houses, most of which became “abandoned property” in Port Harcourt and its environs at the end of the Nigerian civil war in 1970.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Rural-urban migration that transformed to permanent migration is a recurring phenomenon in not just contemporary Imo State (the source area of this study), but throughout Nigeria and other developing countries. Consequently, this paper makes the following recommendations to serve as both short-term and long-term solutions to the adverse effects of recurring out-migrations. The first step is for the federal government of Nigeria to put in place a national migration policy. This will draw the attention of migrants from the core areas to the peripheral productive areas. The migration policy should be integrated into the national planning policy and planned for both federal government and the states. The diversion of migrants from the core to the peripheral areas, where resources are abundant could lead to the development of such untapped resources.

The national migration policy will be useful to the states as it would enable state governments monitor and coordinate the level of rural-urban migration. Thus, as it pertains to the current Imo State, the availability of the policy could encourage intending migrants to migrate to the Ohaji/Egbema/Oguta area of the state that has abundant fertile land and other natural resources etc. Other measures such as purposeful rural agricultural programmes, establishing small- scale industries in some rural areas (at least one in each local government area), and the provision of basic infrastructural facilities such as good road network, electricity; among others could help stem the tide of rural-urban migration in contemporary Imo State of Nigeria in particular, and Nigeria in general.

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