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A Survey of Owerre Environment and the Implications of the Activities of Immigrant Element, 1937-2013

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Abstract

Owerre Socio-Political and Economic Environment, like many communities in Igbo land, was, before the 1976 creation of old Imo State, a simple one that was rooted in simple agrarianism, inter and intra trade relations within itself and among her neighbouring Communities. Her social life was a simple one, but largely revolved around the concept of Uwangbede- a term that described simple daily living- which governed both individual and group interactions. Her Traditional Political Model was anchored on the popular and well established Oha Owerre -which defined the concept and practice of Ohabueze political system, which was an acceptable Socio-Political model among many Igbo groups in the pre colonial time. Inevitably however, beginning from 1951, when Stanger elements began to infiltrate Owerre environment, courtesy of the establishment of Shell De Archy- a British oil consortium, Hausa-Fulani Migrates etc, the Socio-economic structure of Owerre began to experience changes which continuously eroded its traditional environment. The present study therefore is a spirited effort to examine the various changes which Owerre environment has undergone in the face of immigrants activities beginning from 1901 when the first group of Hausa persons made their first appearance in the Owerre area, and subsequent appearance of other immigrant elements such as Shell D Archy in about 1937. It is also the prime objective of the study to serve as reference material for government officials, policy makers, students and the general public who may be interested in this branch of study, as the paper also hopes to fill the lacuna in migration and intergroup relations studies which have not had its focus on Owerre and her immigrant elements. To archive these set objectives, the research employed thematic, historic and analytical research methodologies.

Keywords: Owerre, Immigrants, Political, Economic, Social, Implications.

Theoretical Framework: It has become imperative to re-think the reasons for the presence and activities of stranger elements in Owerre within the time frame of the study. It is even more crucial to re-examine the motives for the immigrants' departure from their source area to their present destination in Owerre, especially in view of the obvious and visible presence of Hausa-fulani immigrants in Owerre within the period under study. Thus far, an overview and analysis of some migration theories may be helpful.

There have been many theories of migration that could help supply answers to the above concern. Thus, the Individual Theory of Migration and the Structural Theory of Migration¹ may be called up to provide answers to the above questions. In this wise, no doubt, Peter Stalker- the originator of the two theories, opine that the Individual Theory of Migration, regards each migrant as a rational being who carefully weighs up the available options, and looks at the best prospect of finding work or sources of lively hood. This theory, according to him, guides the individuals who sought job opportunities outside of their traditional environment,

For instance, workers in the oil industry – Shell D' Archy, which was established in

Owerre in the early 1950^s were said to have been guided by the Individual Theory of Migration. This also includes individual private business operations and entertainers who filled the auxiliary job opportunities created by the Parent Oil Company- Shell D' Archy in Owerre within the time under study. The other relevant theory to this study is; the Structural theory of Migration. This Theory maintains that, individuals or groups migrate to a new destination in response to structural forces pushing the migrants/migrant out of a particular location.² These factors or forces, though beyond his control, could be population pursue, land shortage, gender discrimination, weak and harsh economic condition or religious intolerance.³ The combination of these two theories are essential in appreciating the movement of the Hausa-Fulani, who, for both economic consideration and harsh environmental condition in their source area moved to a more economically promising better environmental friendly Owerre in Eastern Nigeria. Thus, the individual Theory of Migration best explains the thinking behind the movement of immigrants who came to Owerre for jobs, business opportunities in the Oil Industry and other palatable socio-economic conditions prevalent in Owerre at

the time. These two Theories for their obvious relevance to the study, are adapted for the reconstruction and understanding of the reasons behind the migration, and economic activities of immigrant elements in Owerre, Imo State, beginning from the 1950s, when Shell D' Archy explored Iho in Imo State in search of petroleum resources, as well as Hausa-fulani persons who had arrived the study area in about 1901.

Shell D' Archy, Owerre Environment and White Cola Job Seekers

It was in 1937, writes Emmanuel A.C. Orji, that Lawrence Amadioha Oparaku- a veteran motor driver, drove the first batch of Shell Workers into Owerri, an event that signalized the genesis of a great economic revolution in Owerri.⁴

With its foreign workers; both Africans and Nigerians who were attracted to Owerre due to the new economic vent opened by Shell BP, Owerri was in for profound economic and social revolution with far reaching implications. For instance, for the first time, Owerri witnessed the establishment of the first improved hospital, decent club house, modern houses, improved road network, and the influx of musical entertainers that came either through shell's invitation, or were responding to better economic opportunities

provided by shell D' Archy.⁵ Thus, it can be well said that the improvement in the culture of tourism and enjoyment, though already known in Owerre, was not unconnected to the re-introduction by Shell, of Western social life which was before 1951, largely unknown in Owerre area. The establishment of Owerri social club in 1953 by shell D' Archy and importation of foreign singers and the introduction of the Western Ballroom Dance, were part of shell's efforts in reviving social life in Owerri.⁶

In addition however, to Shell's promotion of social life in Owerri and the inevitable economic stimulation the company's overall activities necessitated, was the encouragement of sporting activities within and around Owerri. Shell's sporting interest included; Athletics, Lawn Tennis and Soccer, consequent upon which Shell built the first Football Stadium in Owerri- the Owerri Township Stadium, along Tetlow Road.⁷

In fairness to historical records, let it be noted that, Shell's presence and activities catalyzed developments in other sectors Owerre socio-economic life. For instance, land speculation and sales previously unknown in Owerre, become economic norm during the active days of Shell in owerre, to the point that land

became a prized commodity as people scrambled to have landed properties in an area that would offer them proximity to the social and economic advantages which Shell provided. Besides the employment opportunities which Shell provided, which in turn, guaranteed steady human traffic into Owerre, Shell, no doubt, stimulated growth in Owerre urban population, and became a leading partner in urban planning and development, as could be seen in the layout and construction of the popular Shell Camps in Owerre.

The increased population pressure which was a necessary response to the golden economic and social opportunities created by Shell, no doubt, gave fillip to increased circulation of money due to high salaries and fringe benefits paid to Shell Workers, who in turn, engaged in other economic activities in Owerre. Thus, before long, Owerre had become a concentration camp for all manner of persons, hence bobbling urban life with associate auxiliaries and sundry activities, including urban crimes and misdemeanors characteristic of urbanization and culture interaction,

Owerre Environment, Hausa-fulani Immigrants and Implications; The economic implications of the presence and

activities of Hausa-fulani migrants on Owerri were many and diverse. Some of them were positive and enhancing to the economic growth of Owerre, while others, regrettably were negative and debilitating. For the sake of objectivity in historiography, one is compelled to conform with the postulations of Peter Stalker which makes case for the advantages and disadvantages of immigrants' activities on an economy. For him, the popular myth about immigrants is that they will "take" something from the destination area such as grabbing of jobs or sponge off welfare system. The reality is very different. Most economics would be worse off without the help of new blood and immigrants hands helping out in the economy.⁸

Viewed from this perspective, a closer look at some developing cities in Nigeria, such as Kano, Lagos, Port-Harcourt, and lately Abuja, revealed that these cities were dominated by immigrant population who contributed their best to the development of the areas. On the other hand, one would argue that such cities attracted more immigrants because their economies had been made strong by the economic activities of indigenous population. Again, contrarily, irrespective of how strong an economy is due to the activities of its indigenous people, the

fact remains that the roles of immigrants who have been noted as vectors of new and alien ideas cannot be wished away as important stimulants and contributors to economic growth and development.

In the same vein, the opinion which tends to insist that immigrant population do compete for, and most times, “take” or grab jobs meant for local people, may not be a sustainable argument especially if the immigrant population is of high quality. This is so because high quality immigrant population creates more jobs than they take off from an economy. This is because no economy is stagnant and fixed. Every economy is dynamic in nature and the extent of its expansion depends on the quality and number of indigenous population and the quality and number of immigrant population.

If these variables are in the right proportion, all things being equal, and given their engagement in productive activities, the economy of the receiving community is bound to experience qualitative leap, and by so doing, both the indigenous and immigrant population will benefit, thereby re-enforcing the symbiotic relationship expected of a balanced intergroup relations, hence sustainable development.

All in all, the question that begs for answers is; how did the Hausa-fulani migrants in Owerre within the period of study fit into the above analysis? The answer to this question is not farfetched. In the first instance, it should be known that Hausa-fulani migrants in Owerre were mostly artisans, traders, drivers, or what can be called unskilled workers. They did most of the dangerous and difficult jobs in Owerre. The jobs they did were in most cases not the ideal jobs Owerre indigenes aspired to have or do. For one thing, an average Owerre indigene would, by his nature and social life style, prefer to work as a civil servant, company executive, director of ministry, and all such White Cola jobs which the migrants’ skill did not qualify them to do.

By taking up the “3D” jobs; the Dirty, Dangerous and Difficult jobs in Owerrie, the economic activities of the Owerre man who preferred to work as a professional, was complemented. In this wise, the question of competition for available jobs with the indigenes of Owerre was therefore out of the question. The Hausa-fulani man’s readiness to engage in unskilled jobs such as Night Guard, Laundry, Driving, Trading, Cart pushing, Barbing, etc, provided for unskilled labour which the Owerre economy needed to

argument the economic activities of professional workers in the area. Without the unskilled labour which the Hausa-fulani migrants provided, the economy of Owerre would be an unbalanced one - tilting more towards an elitist economy, which would not have augured well for both the indigenes and the migrants. The implication of this was that the unskilled services which the migrants provided were essential for the overall functioning of Owerre economy.

One other implication of unskilled labour such as the Hausa-fulani labour migrants provided was that they were suitable for seasonal and temporary type of jobs. Because they were temporary and seasonal, they were easily fired when their services were no longer needed, or re-employed when their services became necessary. By so doing, the troubles that emanate when a professional was fired from his work place was nonexistent. The amount of money they were paid either on monthly basis or weekly basis were so little that they did not constitute serious overhead cost on production.

To a larger extent, it was submitted that the unskilled and low cost services which the Hausa-fulani migrants in Owerre provided went a long way in sustaining the simple economy of Owerre. This was even more the

case because only few, if any of Owerre indigenes would want to take up a job as Night Guard, Grand Nut Selling, Wheel Barrow Pushing, Sugar Cane Selling, Nail Cutting, Shoe Shining, Gutter Cleaning, etc. Yet these categories of jobs were essential for smooth running of the economy. This was indeed a good complement to the economy of Owerre.

More so, it is important to note that for an economy to run efficiently, it required both healthy and well-fed population who were ready to be engaged in productive activities. By the mere fact that the migrants helped to provide varieties of food crops to Owerre, they, by this economic activity, added to the varieties of food available in the homes of many Owerre indigenes, and by implication, enhanced their health, happiness and their productive capacity.

Interestingly, it is also known that most of the food items which the migrants brought to Owerre from Northern Nigeria had high medicinal values. For instance, Gallic, Ginger, Onion, Carrot, Cucumber, and Melon, etc. These crops when consumed, enhance healthy living, and by implication, kept the working population healthy and ready to contribute more economically. This is so because it is often believed that "health

is wealth.” This assertion myth not be unconnected to the reality of the day as Owerre indigenes could testify.

In addition to the above was the fact that the migrants were mostly consumers of goods and services, and by implication, helped in creating market for many consumable goods. For instance, Tony Nwosu, a Cow Meat Seller in Eke-ukwu Owerri informed that, if not for his Hausa friend who introduced him to the business of buying and selling of Cow, he would not have been in the business.⁹ To collaborate this information, Suleman informed that,

Owerre people did not have Cow. They only had Igbo-goat. It was Hausa-fulani migrants in Owerre that introduced Hausa-goat and Cow to Owerre. In the most recent past, the business grew to the extent that Owerre people even became owners of Cows. Some of them even became butchers and sellers of Cow Meat as many of them could be seen at Eke onunwa and Relief Markets doing their business. The only thing they did not learn was how to rear Cow. This was because Owerre environment was different from what obtained in the north.¹⁰

Similarly, the expansion of currency exchange market, marketing of agricultural

products and trade in hides and skin as were seen in Owerre, had their history and growth in the activities of Hausa migrants in the area. However, in recent times, the environment of Owerre had become so urbanized, and consequently, had become practically difficult for indigenes to engage in commercial agriculture because farmland had been taken over for construction and other development purposes. To solve these problems, the migrants stepped in to fill the gap by ensuring that agricultural products of various kinds original to Northern Nigeria were sufficiently supplied to Owerre markets, sold and consumed by the inhabitants.

No doubt, by these economic activities, the migrants unarguably helped to sustain the food and medicinal need of the ever expanding and increasing population of Owerri, and by extension, constituted ready markets for the economy of Owerri. This, by implication, was a boost to Owerre people's drive towards economic sustainability. It is also known that a good number of them contributed to Owerre Internally Generated Revenue (IGR) through the payment of hawkers' permit, business premises, sanitation fees, drivers licenses and vehicular particulars to the local council areas where

they operated within the three local governments that constitute the modern Owerri.

The Negative Economic Implications; No doubt, the above account seems to paint a picture of an “economic city of God,” and by implication presents the migrants as though, they were “economic agents” sent by the “god of economy” to work for, and with Owerre indigenes. On the contrary, this might, in fact, not be the complete truth, as the negative economic implications of the migrants’ activities on Owerre and its inhabitants were many, diverse and above all, visible.

Perhaps the best way to begin to analyze the negative implications of the Hausa-fulani migrants’ activities on the socio-economic life of Owerre is to re-echo the warnings of Francis Walker thus, the objection to immigration as a social phenomenon has been anchored on many reasons by social, economic and political commentators.¹¹ For him, the entrance into America’s political, social and economic life of vast masses of peasantry is a matter which no intelligent patriot can look upon without the greatest apprehension and alarm.¹² In most case they are often seen as beaten men from beaten races, representing the worst failures in the

struggle for existence.¹³ Similarly, George Borjas maintains that, The United States needs to restrict the number of unskilled immigrants on the grounds that these do not contribute enough to the American economy.¹⁴ These arguments and objections are based strictly on economic grounds. They also touch on welfare of host communities.

There are a few others whose objections to immigration are based on racial consideration. These classes of people are mainly politicians of countries who hope to weep up political sentiments in order to remain politically relevance. For instance, Enoch Powell, in 1968 informs that, immigration would lead to river of blood to the neo-fascist policies of Australia. Freedom party all have been able to tap popular sentiment that prefers to project all problems onto a group of outsiders.¹⁵ To what degree do the opinions expressed above affect or boarder on the topic under discussion?

Taken from these view points, a necessary question is, is it right to say that the quality of the Hausa-fulani Migrants in Owerre was so low and incapable of stimulating the right economic growth in their host communities? There is transparent truth in this claim because from investigations, it was crystal clear that majority of the Hausa-fulani

Migrants in Owerri were mainly unskilled, untrained, uneducated and less productive type of people whose labour input was not capable of stimulating economic growth in a technology and scientific driven economy or one that aspires to such economic height as do Owerri.¹⁶ Owerri Capital Territory for instance, is a modern city which needs crop of trained and educated man-power with the right ideological frame of mind and mentality to drive and grow its economy.

By the simple fact that a good percentage of the migrants were semi skilled, and, arguably, many of them unskilled, it therefore logically follows that the migrants took more from the economy of Owerre than they contributed to the same economy. This is akin to the views of many a scholar who have argued that modern migrants are, in many cases, people of inferior quality, and beaten men from beaten areas. This, perhaps, may be the best way the class of the Hausa-fulani Migrants the present study is interested in could be described.

The above rather undiluted submission was ably supported by yet another observation of Peter Walker which insists that, no nation in modern times would deliberately allow its best brains to migrate to other areas. If this is allowed, it would lead to a serious case of

brain-drain. To guard against this, developed nations do all within their powers to keep their best and skilled man-power. Poor nations or societies on the other hand, due to their inability to secure the right socio-economic and political environment suitable for citizens' self fulfillment, consequently by faulty policies and harsh implementation strategies, push their citizens away to other areas where perhaps conditions are more accommodating.

Relating this hypothesis to Hausa-fulani Migrants in Owerre, one discovers that those who left Northern Nigeria to Owerre were not the best of northern citizens. They were, according to a source, those who were frustrated by unfavorable economic, social, political, environmental, as well as climatic conditions that were prevalent in Northern Nigeria at the time of their migration. These migrants on the other hand, were attracted to their destination in Owerre by better conditions that existed there. Because their objective, among others, was to better their economic condition, they consequently employed every strategy including primitive acquisition model, which favours endless gathering of material goods without commensurate input to the same economy.¹⁷

For instance, as observed during field research for this report, many of the migrants, in order to cut living cost, a number of them happily lived in one room apartment without having any property inside except their sleeping mat. Some of them who could not secure space in the air-tight rooms where many of them slept at night, passed each night in the open air space outside of the building. A good number of them lived in Owerre without their families. In the same vein, a number of them were seasonal migrants to Owerre who did not have any stake in the economic wellbeing of Owerre inhabitants.

By implications, since their strategy was to maximize profit and minimize cost, they tried to milk as much as they could from the economy without minding the effect therein.¹⁸ This was in addition to the fact that besides the consequences on the economy which were caused by their failure to live up to their statutory financial responsibilities, their population was again an added burden on the lean economy of Owerre. For instance, they used water provided by the state as well as roads built by the state. Yet many of them found it absolutely difficult to pay head tax, income tax and other personal levies to the government.

The question that emanate from all these is, why couldn't the local councils where the migrants lived in Owerre compel them to pay the required taxes to the government. Victor Ayozie explains that, previous attempts to get the migrants to pay personal tax to the government generated crisis. Worse still was the virulent opposition mounted by the migrants when government attempted to relocate them from Ama-Hausa area to a proposed new site. This act of rating insubordination was not helpful to government's strive towards better economy for the state.¹⁹

This was pure economic sabotage. No wonder Nzerem affirmed that, a good number of the Hausa-fulani Migrants in Owerre were tax evaders. They did everything to avoid tax payment. Those of them who were in the business of begging, drug peddling, shoe shining, prostitution, nail cutting and cattle rearing were always in the habit of avoiding tax payment.²⁰ By implication, these anti economic behaviours did not help the growth of Owerre economy. Instead it bred the seed of economic underdevelopment. More so, because of the migrants' evasive behaviour to the economy, it became somewhat difficult for government to have accurate statistic of revenue that came from the migrants, if any.

Consequently, it became difficult to plan and capture the migrants in the state annual budget as distinct economic unit requiring special government economic attention. Instead, what individual governors did was to provide the migrants with a few social amenities from successive governors' personal funding.²¹ For instance, it is on record that "the Well" that supplied water to Hausa-fulani quarters in Ama-Hausa, the new Mosques at Ama-Hausa and the Central Mosque at Government House area of Owerre were all provided by the State Governors from personal funding, and not from official government budget.²²

Victor Ayozie supported the above submission when he reports thus, the Hausa-fulani Migrants who lived in Owerre did not pay taxes. Whatever was government presence in the Hausa quarters by way of social amenities were responses to election promises and were sponsored from the individual Governors personal funding.²³ Similarly, Owerre Municipal Council Chairman might decide to provide them with any amenities in order to either maintain good relationship or fulfill an election campaign promise. Whatever the migrants got from the local government was as a result of the fact that the migrants were part of the

Azuzu or any other political ward within the three local governments into which Owerre was divided, and by implication were constitutionally entitled to benefit from whatever the local council provided for the ward. These were the known means through which they got a few things from the government. This was aside of the Islamic pilgrimage funding which was specially provided for, and sponsored from government official budget.

Political Implications; Perhaps, one of the best known political implications of the presence of Hausa-fulani migrants was the replication of Hausa-fulani traditional political structure in Owerre- a system which both Owerre traditional political system and Imo State government had to recognize and contained with, irrespective of its variance with what was traditionally obtainable in Owerre. The implication of this was that the traditional government of Owerre had to create means of avoiding clash of interest and to ensure that the immigrants while observing the rules of their traditional political system, also remained law abiding to both Owerre traditional institutions and the government of Imo State.

It is a known history that wherever they lived, their tendency to extra judiciall

Social Implications; Enoch Powell's view on migration as a way of contaminating the pure blood of indigenous people may not be out of context in this regard. As could be seen from the experience of Owerre people, mixgenation brought about by intermarriages between Hausa-fulani labour migrants and Owerre people resulted in the birth of persons who were neither pure Owerre by blood nor pure Hausa-fulani. The then Sarkin Hausawa in Imo State was an example of such mix breedization. There were many of them whose paternal home was somewhere in Hausa land, and their maternal home was somewhere in Owerre. The increased numbers of Hausa-fulani labour migrants through mix breeding, if not controlled could lead to the adulteration of Owerre peoples' culture and traditional life style. It might as well lead to the distortion of Owerre peoples' history of migration and settlement, since a good number of Migrants were culturally ambivalent, reproducing both Owerre culture and Hausa culture, as well as mixed blood line.

Environmental Implications; It might not be right to say that the devastations caused to the physical environment of Owerre through the activities of the Hausa-fulani migrants were comparable to that caused to Niger

Delta area due to the activities of Oil prospecting companies. Even at that, however, one of the devastations was the havocs which their cattle caused to farms and crops in Obinze, Iheagwa Umuguma, Irette Orogwe and some parts of Orji where existed some acres of land where economic crops were cultivated. Such crops as maize, vegetables, etc, were often at the mercy of cattle when they were taken around for grazing. This, in many instances, caused problems between Hausa-fulani Herders and owners of such farms especially around Obinze area of Owerre.

Again, there were instances when cattle that belonged to the migrants polluted sources of water such as streams like the Ota-Miri and the Nworie Rivers. These two rivers, especially the Ota Miri, besides pipe-born water, rain water and boreholes, were the alternative sources of water supply to Owerri people. Most times, when cattle were taken to the rivers or stream to drink off their water, they dropped dongs and urinated into the water, and by so doing, rendered the waters unsafe for use by the inhabitants of the area.

Also to be noted was the fact that since most of the migrants dealt majorly on agricultural products, wastes such as fruit pills and spoilt fruits were most of the time littered on

strategic areas in Owerre, thereby defacing the capital city. More so, the congestions and sometimes road accidents which heavy duty trucks that carried agricultural products from Northern Nigeria to Owerre caused in the cities of Owerre were better imagined than seen. It was against these reasons that a new trailer pack was created by Imo State Government along Owerre –Port Harcourt Road, very close to Obinze Cattle Market. In addition to this was the traffic jam which cattle on grazing caused within the capital territory of Owerre.

The implications of all these were health hazard and environmental degradation which were capable of causing outbreak of epidemic and consequently, plunged the state into a state of emergency especially those days when animal and water born-diseases were great challenges to the people due to inadequate health facilities. This again reminds one of diseases as laser fever, Ebola, Cholera, typhoid, Zika Virus, etc, which could have been enhanced by the activities of the herders.

Conclusions; the study of immigrant elements and intergroup relations world over, is a serious business requiring painstaking intellectual efforts. The present attempt is indeed a scratch on the huge efforts required

to do justices to the study. However, the present effort has succeeded in contributing its bit to a rather huge academic project by x-raying the activities and contributions of immigrant elements to the making of Owerre. It is however, the hope of the present writer that other scholars will, in the same spirit of objective historiography, consider this branch of study worthy of intellectual attention, in the believe that, before long, the study on migration and intergroup relations as it concerns the Owerre people will have been given the deserved attention.

End Notes

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