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SOCIAL PRACTICES AND ETHNIC IDENTITY OF BEKWARRA MIGRANT WORKERS IN ONDO AND NASARAWA STATES, NIGERIA, 1940-2015

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Abstract: Bekwarra migrants, wherever they settle in good numbers, engage in undying social practices that maintain their distinct ethnic identity. Such social practices include cultural dance, traditional marriage, New Yam Festivals, Age Grade system, burial rites and work songs. These practices perform functions that range from maintenance of their ethnic identity, socialization and enculturation of their children, social cohesion and literary aesthetics. This paper, using functionalism as its theoretical framework, examines such practices as are obtained in Ondo State in South West geographical zone and Nasarawa State in North Central geographical zones of Nigeria where they form clusters of populations that play prominent roles in socio-economic and political roles in their host states. The paper concludes that the maintenance of ethnic identity among the rural migrants in Nigeria is a social security system that served the purpose of giving them self-identity in a hyper, multi-ethnically complex country.

Keywords: Social Practices; Ethnic Identity; Bekwarra; Migrant Workers.

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INTRODUCTION

Man tends to move from an area where life is difficult to that in which he believes it to be better. migration is not peculiar to any group of humans. Dating back to the 17th and 18th centuries, for instance, following the decline in the wool and linen industry, the Scotch-Irish in response to the rise in the cotton industry in Britain, had to migrate (Perpillou, 1977; Odey2018). Similarly, in agricultural communities, emigration has been taking place from areas of restriction in cultivation to those where there are opportunities for cultivation. Nigeria has increasingly witnessed the migration of rural populations across geo-economic boundaries for the sole purpose of farming. Within the scope of our inquiry in this paper, we look at the two directions of this genre of population movement; toward the cocoa producing areas of Western Nigeria (designated as a cash crop in the British economic system), and the purely food growing area of the central part of Nigeria (Ajor 1997).

From his studies of cocoa production in Western Nigeria, Falola (1985) has shown that by the 1920s, cocoa production, with a higher premium in prices compared to other crops tagged as “subsistence”, had been well established, and attracted labourers from non-cocoa producing areas. Thus, between the 1940s and 1960s, there was a movement, of phenomenal proportion, of farmers to Ife, from Ondo, Akure areas of Western Nigeria, to cultivate cocoa. “There was also movements of people from other parts of Nigeria who were not of the Yoruba stock into the area of cocoa production for the purpose of farming” (Ajor 2018, p. 80). After some time, Ondo and Akure became cocoa-producing areas and so received migrant farmers from other Yoruba communities as well as a farmer from non-Yoruba communities. Many farmers of Bekwarra descent migrated to Ondo as their destination, while Idaure in Ondo, remained as their reception center from where some of them dispersed to other parts of Yorubaland. Although migrant farmers from Bekwarra were found in several Yoruba cocoa farming villages, the general understanding of the Bekwarra people of their destination is

Ondo. This is because the destination of most of the original migrants to Yorubaland was Ondo, which became a generic name for the destination of Bekwarra migrants to Yorubaland.

Among other reasons, the availability of land, to a considerable extent, determined the pattern and direction of the migration of farm labourers. The desire to work in the cocoa farms in the west, with the hope of making more money and the availability of vast and arable land in the central part of Nigeria informed the decision of some farmers of Bekwarra to take the northerly direction, finding themselves in the fertile and vast central region of Nigeria of Taraba, Nasarawa and Benue States.

One characteristic of the rural cash crop or food-producing areas is that they served as a pull for rural labour migration. Thus, peoples of other ethnic nationalities moved in that direction where land and labour was available, making the destination centers of this rural movement of populations an agglomeration of peoples of different cultural milieu, who arrived with various cultural baggage. Acknowledging the phenomenon of population movement in Ife cocoa-producing society in the early 1920s and up to the 1960s, Falola (1985) observed that “the influx to Ife was such that the population of strangers outnumbered the Ife in many villages” (p. 23). The same is replete in other rural communities which received strangers as farmers. We should not forget that the rural population drift is for the exploitation of the resources of the destination areas occasioned by the geo-economic differences and availability of land for exploitation in their new areas which are unavailable to them in their natal homes. Thus, the two groups of people, strangers and indigenes alike, see themselves as partners in business with the intent to make a profit.

THEORETICAL FUNCTIONALISM

FRAMEWORK:

Functionalism examines the society or sub-society through a functional framework that

recognizes that everything, no matter how seemingly strange, out of place, or seemingly harmful, serves a purpose (Jia 2015). Each part, whether artifact (physical product) or mentifact (non-tangible things or practices) are interpreted in terms of their contribution to the stability of the whole society (Kotze & Van Rensburg 2003).

In pragmatic terms, this functional perspective assists these researches to see how aspects of Bekwarra culture which have been 'exported' to Ondo state in South West of Nigeria and Nasarawa State in North Central Nigeria such as sacrifices, age-grade system, work songs, cultural dance and maintenance of social and developmental associations among Bekwarra migrant workers help in the maintenance of their ethnic identity (Odey 2018; Ajor 2021). Apart from this, other functions such as socialization among the people themselves, enculturation of their children whose roots in their ancestral home must be established even if they do not reside in Bekwarra, achievement of social cohesion and literary aesthetics are derivable from the social and cultural practices, among the Bekwarra migrants.

DETERMINANTS OF CULTURAL IDENTITIES AMONG RURAL MIGRANTS.

As we noted in the preceding paragraph above, their movement is basically for business. And to derive profit from it, "non-economic institutions like kinship ties, ethnic affiliations, and other forms of customary obligations like the age-grade systems, family unions, among others, have always played crucial roles in the rural economy and social life" (Ayor 2018, p. 83). Migrants generally, whether rural or urban, are initially and usually in the minority in their destination areas. This position, therefore, places them at the lowest rung in their new society, that is, as aptly noted by SEPHIS, "at the bottom of the destination society (Laws 2011, p. 43)." To reposition themselves in their new economic environment, they had to come together to form self-identity. SEPHIS affirmed this by noting that, "between the home and host societies, into which they were migrating, migrants developed an identity" (p. 65). This

low position compels them to form an identity by coming together in fellowship, which fellowship is most often expressed in their cultural practices.

There were some advantages in coming together. One of them is the flow of information, mobilization of capital and support, which individuals may not readily accessible on their individual terms but can get through association with their ethnic affiliations. Berry (1975) made the point eloquently that:

Institutions such as lineage or ethnic communities may facilitate the flow of information. The multiethnic composition of the agricultural areas is usually fertile ground for cultural practices among the various ethnic groups as an individual entity, and the wider comity of ethnic groups as a cooperative of the whole. Control and cooperation of the whole began with the individual unit, so also is conflict resolutions among contending interests, which is a necessary part of human existence.... In cocoa farming, social and cultural institutions or relationships have provided appropriate mechanisms for organizing and expanding cocoa production (p. 75).

The multiethnic composition of the agricultural areas is usually a fertile ground for cultural practices among the various ethnic groups as an individual entity, and the wider comity of ethnic groups as a cooperative of the whole (Nwagbara *et al.*, 2009; Odey *et al.*, 2019). Control and cooperation of the whole began with the individual unit, so also is conflict resolutions among contending interests, which is a necessary part of human existence.

Another factor for this cultural manifestation is the multiethnic composition of the cocoa-producing areas which gave rise to cultural cooperation among rural farmers. Among the migrants, one of the ways of achieving their economic goal was social and cultural cooperation, which are some of the mechanisms in the organization of cocoa business, especially in West Africa.

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL PRACTICES OF BEKWARRA RURAL FARMERS.

Cultural practices mentioned above, among the migrants, though initially slow and gradual, increasingly became dynamic and became a binding force in the people's way of life. The desire of cocoa farmers to make an excessive gain at the cost of migrant farmers, led to the use of cheating, changing of agreements, and other unsavory means in the cocoa business. To cope, Bekwarra migrants were compelled by the dynamics on the field to form associations of close contact. This close contact in itself was a catalyst for cultural manifestations.

Thus, organizing themselves into lineage groups, kinship, age companies, etc, provided a common forum for friendship, which afforded assistance and support for each other in their times of need. It also provided the necessary ferment which blossomed and sustained their self-identity, the corollary for cultural manifestations among the migrants.

Cultural sustenance outside their homes received support from their contact with the people at home. It should be understood that most of these migrants made yearly visits to their homes between January and March. One respondent pointed out that migrants systematically visited home, sometimes twice in a year (S. Oko, personal communication, 2001). Such visits to their homes usually took place in the dry season, a period of most festivities and ceremonies, and which allowed them to participate in some festivals and ceremonies. Such visits served as kinds of refreshing contacts with the cultural caldron at home, the impact of which they carried back with them to their destination areas. In other words, this systematic contact with the people at home helped to keep aflame the cultural fire in the diaspora.

Added to the above was this common notion among these migrants that they were only out there for business purposes. The notion was expressed by a group of respondents during an interview in Omilinye camp, Idanre Local Government Area of Ondo State of Western Nigeria. Bekwarra migrants did not live in seclusion

or "*Sabo*" like their Hausa counterparts, but like the Hausa, they maintained and strengthened their sense of ethnic distinctiveness because it served their economic goal (Atu & Abutungho 2018). So the idea that although far away from home, they were however not severed from their biological and cultural roots was ever-present in their minds. It is not surprising why some traditional political, social and religious belief systems among the people at home were manifested among the migrants. Some of the cultural imperatives which have found expression among the migrants in Yorubaland are the sacrifices of "*afutang*" and "*nndum*", the age-grade system, and Bekwarra way of social organization among the migrants. We may have to observe that some of the practices would however not be exactly the same as the ones at home.

The Sacrifice of "*Afutang*"

One belief system and sacrifice in Bekwarra that was found among her migrants in Yorubaland were "*afutang*". "*Afutang*" was a shrine that was erected in honour of dead ancestors. Etymologically, it is "*afo ye k'itang*", meaning, He's dead and gone to the ground" (Ushie 2001). The term was also used to refer to the entire process of sacrificing to departed souls. There were both maternal and paternal "*afutang*". James Ashu (1986) categorises "*afutang*" into two, "*afutang-ikani*" which belonged to an entire clan, and "*afutang-irifen*" belonging to a family, a group of people or a village.

Whenever, for example, a father or a prominent person died, his son or his representative, if his son was too young, touched the head of the deceased with a stone. That stone was kept in a shrine in memory of the departed, and came to symbolise "*afutang*". It also symbolised a physical representation of the deceased spirit, which was still considered alive somewhere. A puddled heap of mud was built behind a house or under a tree and the stone was fixed on the mud which held it firmly in place when it became dry. The number of stones on any "*afutang*" represented the number of dead ancestors of the family or village or clan, as the case may be. Although dead, they were believed to be

interested in the affairs of their children or offspring, and being in the presence of the Supreme Being, “*Atabuchi*”, they could influence, advocate and avert misfortunes as well as check the bad influence of evil spirits (Ashu, 1986). In order to placate and give honour to them, offerings in the form of sacrifices were made to them through “*afutang*”. Their names were, as a standing rule, always mentioned during times of sacrifices to “*afutang*”. The Zulu of Southern Africa has a similar belief as described by Mutwa (1977):

If you were to see an Ena or (the soul), you would find that it looked exactly like the person it belonged to, although not of flesh and blood It lives on for a time after the death of the body, and can often be seen, especially when it is summoned up by the witchdoctors from the land of the spirits, to be consulted in times of trouble and asked to pray to the gods for us (p. 7).

One of the processes through which a deceased person joined the ancestors was through proper traditional burial rites. Anyone who did not follow the path of honour as their fathers, or who did not receive such honour at his burial, his soul could not take its place among the departed ancestors. Some of the earliest migrants from Bekwarra who were probably crushed to death when felling trees in Yoruba forests, or who died and their remains were either not found or given a traditional burial were considered lost. They were regarded as having lost their rights among their people at home. This traditional interpretation of life after death, which guarded the worldview of the people, was closely adhered to. This was the point of the Secretary of “*Agunihe*” Bekwarra community in Ondo, a socio-cultural association of Bekwarra people in Akure, Ondo that:

Some of these early immigrants got lost and were assumed dead. Some were buried like infants in Ondo State without befitting traditional rites. You will believe with me that these people lost their natural rights, like the right

of ownership to family land at home, right to graveyard to show to their descendants (An Oral address given by the Secretary, 2001).

Since the required traditional burial rites could not be given in a strange land, one of the commitments of the association was to ensure that the “dead joined their ancestors at home” (M. Adie, personal communication, 2001). This commitment entailed the physical conveyance of the remains of the fallen gallant farmers to their homes, at whatever cost, where their bodies could receive a proper burial and their spirits could find rest among their progenitors. Except infants, all deceased adult migrants are buried in their homes in Bekwarra.

The historical significance of “*afutang*” was, among others, preserving the genealogical tree of each family or community and the transmission of the same to succeeding generations. This was achieved by mentioning the names of the ancestors during sacrifices to the hearing of the young people. Bekwarra migrants on their own part would contribute to family needs and village projects, and maintain their links with the culture at home as a show of identity.

The Sacrifice of “*Nndum*”

“*Nndum*” was another aspect of Bekwarra cultural practice which was alive among her migrants in their destination areas.

Nndum was a guardian spirit given to Bekwarra people by God at creation to ensure the chastity of women for procreation and the survival of the nation. “*Nndum* is as old as Bekwarra”. It was an embodiment of the existence of the entire nation giving to them a peculiar identity from other humankind (Ayor, 2018, p. 20).

Among Bekwarra people, marital infidelity was regarded as both sin and crime- sin against “*nndum*”, and a crime against both the husband of the woman and his age grade with grave danger to the family and community. Sexual profanity especially among married women incurred the anger

of 'nndum' which could respond by threatening the lives of the entire family. To avert the anger of this guardian spirit, sacrifices were performed through its chosen priest in each family. All traditional marriages which went through the processes of bride price payment, gun-shots, followed by bridal wailing ("*ologba*") were valid and its sanctity respected by all. These processes, especially the gun-shots and bridal wailing, served as a notice to "nndum" which promptly extended its protection over the woman, and the family. Since sacrifice to nndum could not be done outside the family shrine, any form of infraction was, as a rule, brought home for sacrifice. The migrants necessarily had to return to their homes in order to perform the sacrifice.

"Nndum" ensured that people respected the sanctity of marriage and by extension the needed stability and discipline of families which was the basis and backbone of good citizenship in the society. As it relates to this study, for instance, it served as a reminder to the migrants that their roots lay at their homes thereby imposing a binding force on them.

Age-Grade System

The age-grade or age-company (*aten*) among the Bekwarra, like in most societies of Africa, is a very important institution in the culture of the people. It is a social organization. It is the arm of society, which maintained social order, organized cooperation in the society, while also maintaining certain rules of good behaviour among members as well as the provision of social services to the society at large. A.Y. Cann (1936) in his intelligence report has expressed the view that, like the Igbo society, village system of governance in Bekwarra, age-sets were important elements in village administration. This aspect of Bekwarra culture finds manifestation among migrants in their destination areas. We noted earlier that migrants from other ethnic nationalities live as a community. This makes the organisation of the village system in the diaspora different from the practice at home, especially in the provision of social services. Their services among members are restricted to

condolence visits to bereaved members, assisting sick members, assisting others in their farms, and the provision of soft and short-term loans to members.

Information gathered from respondents in several camps in Ondo State showed that a cross-section of age grades at home is widespread. Few of the age-grades are stated herein descending order—"Inumber, Akachief, Irubber, Itoro, Idolar, Naira, and Imikimiki". Names of age grades were chosen to reflect a significant historical event in the history of Bekwarra and it was maintained until all members of the set are extinct. Migrants maintained their age-grade names even in diaspora. The oldest among migrants in Akure, who belonged to "Inumber" age company at the time of data collection, was IdiegeAdinya who had spent 35 years as a migrant farmer in Yorubaland. Our data among migrants in Ondo revealed that members of "Akachief", the second age company on our list above, had the longest-serving migrants in Ajegunle, the reception centre for Bekwarra migrants in Ondo State.

Each age company sometimes came together and socialised, especially if they had a good number of their members. Such gatherings which took place in several camps with occasional coming together of all the camps were common, especially during the dry season when they had less work to occupy their time. Riddles, plays, jokes, and traditional dances were common features of such meetings, while each camp, no matter their number, regarded itself as one village; reminiscent of the kind at home, although the number of units was more than the traditional seven units (*Ikaa-Idiaha*) at home, they still regarded their gathering as "the national body" (*Ikaa-idieha*). Erring members paid fines in money or items depending on the prevailing circumstance. There were instances where some recalcitrant migrants were sent back home. The vibrancy of the age company system among Bekwarra migrants in Yorubaland, especially in Ondo as well as in Taraba and Nasarawa States in central Nigeria is not in doubt. They have successfully recreated it in their various places of farming activities.

Socio-Political Organisation Among the Migrants

The socio-political organisation among Bekwarra migrants in the diaspora is the same as it is at home although with some changes to suit their circumstances. In Bekwarra society, the chief (*Ushie*) and his council of elders (*Ikimushe* or *ikim Udyara*) is the highest ruling body. The age-grade and village assembly both had a great influence in matters of public interest, while the decision of the village assembly superseded that of the chief and his council. Although these migrants did not have or install a chief, they however had recognised leaders. The first Bekwarra migrants to reside in any camp or village automatically assumed the position of leader among them. This arrangement developed because the older residents, through their long stay at such locations must have won the confidence of the indigenous inhabitants as well as a good understanding of their various locations. The new migrants depended on them for logistics and information on their new environment.

From the 1990s however, leadership changed when those who were literate among them became leaders. The change was necessitated by the need to protect and defend the rights of migrants which were often cheated and sometimes abused by some fraudulent farm owners. Borne out of these concerns, therefore, a socio-cultural association of Bekwarra migrants in Akure, the state capital of Ondo, was formed in 1994 with the name, “*Agunihe* Bekwarra Community” (Togetherness of Bekwarra) (Edinyang et al., 2020). The initiator of this association was Ukani Simeon UsheApu, a police officer from Ugboro who was serving in Akure, Ondo command. The demise of its founding president occasioned the election of a new president, Ukani Moses Adie Ekunke, himself a farmer, residing in Akure. Being a farmer, he would appreciate better the problems which migrant farmers faced every day.

The formation of “*Agunihe*” enhanced the proper coordination of migrants. It also checked the challenges faced by migrants which frustrated their efforts toward realizing a financial gain in their destination areas. This also ensures

that they, like their host society and other farmers, had good returns for their labour.

Thus, “*Agunihe*” became the major promoter of Bekwarra culture in the Ondo area in particular, and Yorubaland in general. Through the initiative and coordination of this group, an annual celebration of Bekwarra culture in Akure started. The yearly fiesta brought Bekwarra migrant farmers to several rural areas of Ondoto the urban centre of Akure through their yearly celebrations, courtesy of “*Agunihe*”. In those annual celebrations where Bekwarra cultural practices were eloquently demonstrated, invitations were extended to the Ondo State Governor, Local Government Chairmen, migrants from other ethnic nationalities, and many other public personalities and the general public.

Work Songs Among Migrant Workers

A “work song” is a song that any worker sings to accompany a specific physical on going work. Such a song can be rendered by a worker or chanted by a person and responded to by a group. Farmers as well as other workers evolve a kind of music that enhances physical performance and their productivity in work. Work songs are rendered by men clearing land, tilling the land, and by women singing as they weed a farm or grind millet or pound (yam) fufu with mortar and pestle (Ushie, Orji-Mba & Olofu 2015). As workers chant these songs, the work gets done with incredible speed....” (Finnegan, 1970, p. 226). The rhythmical song and music encourage the workers to work harder, faster, and with more enjoyment. They are used to lighten, coordinate and embellish labour (Ushie, Orji & Olofu, 2015)

Bekwarra migrant farmers, wherever they settled, either in Kadarko, Giza, Beli in Central Nigeria, or as settlers in Idanre and Ajegunle in Ondo State, took along with them oral art, especially of work songs and cultural dance performances. And they are still maintaining them as they are practised in the ancestral homeland. Such songs may be composed on the spur of the moment or as any social occurrence that can be performed to be extolled or criticized. Such songs are part of the songs sung during

cultural dances when they are performed under the moonlight, on festive occasions such as New Yam Festivals, burials, and in other social gatherings.

CONCLUSION

Our study has demonstrated that migration of people for economic consideration does not necessarily entail loss or abandonment of their identity. As long as they maintain some level of contact – physical, spiritual, social - in enlivening the experiences through participation in the activities, they are sure to retain their identity. Bekwarra migrant workers/farmers settling in Yoruba land and in Nasarawa State either as stranger elements or as indigenes as in the case of the latter, retain and maintain their ethnic identity through participation in social and cultural practices that replicate what is obtained in their ancestral land. So participation in some worship activities, cultural dances, work songs that enable people to work more with ease, age-grade system and social-developmental groups help in maintaining the bond with the homeland and achieving stability of their Bekwarra identity, fostering the social-economic purposes of their migration and social stability of the society. In a multi-ethnic ambience such as Nasarawa or Ondo States where migrant workers from other ethnic groups are present in great numbers, people can lose their identities, hence the maintenance of ethnic identity among the rural migrants in Nigeria is a social security system that served the purpose of giving them self-identity in a hyper, multi-ethnically complex country.

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