The Socio-economic Basis of a Diaspora Community: *Igbo bu ike*

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In this article the author discusses the history and actions of the Igbo community, primarily via their 'home town unions or associations' and more recently through the activities in the diaspora of the World Igbo Congress (WIC), both to establish their presence in their adopted countries throughout the world but also, and more importantly, to maintain links with 'home town' communities. This takes place especially via large and small-scale economic ventures, including capital construction projects, local investments, and occasionally local recruitment for the international market, from 'home towns' (often small villages) in Eastern Nigeria. The first part of the paper discusses the socio-economic activities that Igbo 'home town unions' are involved in, the second discusses the historical background to these unions, the third analyses their success and what future contributions such groups might have in a rapidly 'globalising' world economy.

Introduction

The Igbo ethnic group, found in southeastern Nigeria, comprises the largest population group in the region and is one of the three largest in the federal republic. The location of the Igbos in tropical rainforest and surrounded by other ethnic groups, has restrained their expansion, and thus 'Igboland', to use the informal term employed by some writers (Crowder, 1971:129; Uchendu, 1965; Meek, 1967; Isichei, 1971; Afigbo, 1981 to name a few), is relatively small. Pressures on the land for farming, housing and other requirements has no doubt had some influence on their lifestyle.

Igbo clans have traditionally been associated with trades and professions which have involved travel, such as the ironsmiths from Awka, the medicine men from Orlu, and the long-distance traders from Nkwerre. However it was probably the impact of international trade - initially the barter systems set up with coastal traders, and later the slave trade - which expanded the horizons of the Igbo traders and others who acquired tradable skills with the advent of colonialism (Afigbo, 1981:345-346). Some Igbo, especially long-distance traders and purveyors of specialised skills like the Aro, Nri, Umunneoha, Nkwerre & Awka, traveled extensively among the Igbo and their neighbours but never before did Igbo businessmen have as much opportunity for travel as they had under colonial rule. By the 1920s they made their presence felt amongst the Yoruba and Hausa; by the 1940s it was becoming a raging storm and causing disquiet on the part of the host communities.
There have been four main phases of significant movement: first, the pre-colonial era up to the end of the slave trade in the mid-19th century; then, the colonial and early post-colonial era, up to the mid-1960s; the exodus of refugees during and after the Biafran war; and, finally, the current era of movement which, although lacking a clear start to demarcate it from the post-war period, has seen different reasons for migration become prominent, such as the effects of global recession in the late 1980s.

In this article an attempt will be made to present an overview of the three post-slavery periods in relation to the Igbo diaspora. It also aims to identify the uniqueness of the Igbo experience in comparison to the similar experiences of others such as the Yorubas and Hausas, who have been the subject of more extensive research. Finally, it presents a diagnostic analysis of the extent and state of the Igbo diaspora in the early 21st century and concludes by speculating on the future of the diaspora and its relationship with ‘Igboland’. The Igbo experience, it is argued, is unusual for various reasons. First, this is because of a background in different traditional institutions: the Igbo have an acephalous political structure in contrast to hierarchical structures of both the Yoruba kingdoms and Hausa emirates. Igbo also retain a closer attachment to their village unit, or ‘home town’, than to the greater Igbo ‘ethnic’ grouping – considered a ‘constructed’ colonial identity as evidenced by the failure of the Union Igbo project (Van den Besselaar, 1997). Second, the Igbo were involved in one of the earliest African post-independence wars of secession (after the failed attempt of Katanga in the Congo), the Nigerian (federalist) Biafra (secessionist) civil war (1966-1970). This was a historic moment that saw the Igbo unite to defend (albeit unsuccessfully) their perceived group interests. A third factor is that ‘Igboland’ itself, with its poor farmland and limited population-holding capacity, has provided the ‘push’ to give impetus to the movement of Igbo far afield to make a living; yet their considerable success at creating a ‘diasporic’ identity with continued strong links with local community or home town networks is distinctive in comparison with other ethnic groupings.

Finally, whilst the Yorubas – their western Nigerian neighbours with similar diasporic relations, show strong signs of ethnic identity in their ‘new’ communities – the Igbo, though perceived as cosmopolitan and receptive to change by researchers, are paradoxically more involved in home town kinship activities and consider their residence ‘abroad’ as a sojourn, expecting (until very recently) to return to their native home town or village on retirement, or when rich enough (Gugler, 1971; Peil, 1991:37-38; Osaghae, 1994). Thus the notion of permanent Igbo communities in the diaspora, although a longstanding reality, has only recently begun to be grappled with by Igbo at home and abroad.

The existing literature on the diaspora, though substantial, is of varying quality, especially when related to the experiences of different ethnic groups. A lot was written in the 1950s and early 1960s on the activities of home town improvement unions (see Ottenburg, 1955; Gugler, 1961; Nwaka, 1986:58), and the origins of the ‘heeboes, Iboes and Igbos’ have been the subject of various anthropological studies by early missionaries and anthropologists such as Jones (1924), Meek (1967) and others.

Possibly the most well-known writing on Igbo culture, as viewed over a spectrum of time and with some relationship to Igbo in the Diaspora, is provided by Chinua Achebe’s (1958-1964) trilogy of novels – in chronological order of their settings: Things Fall Apart, Arrow of God and No Longer at Ease. The fullest account of life in ‘Igboland’ prior to this era was Olaudah Equiano’s (1793), An Interesting Narrative of his life before his capture and enslavement. In more recent times there has been a collection of
self-published literature by Igbos who live or have lived abroad, with anecdotal information about their life experiences and ‘advice’ for would-be travellers (Oji, 1992).

Conversely and equally significant today are the number of Igbos in the diaspora today who have become a part of the criminal underworld, and who live up to the media stories about their nefarious activities (West Africa, 1998). More positive are the largely undocumented achievements of second- and third-generation diaspora families who have acquired academic and professional qualifications which have ensured their entry into the ‘elite’ stratum of the diaspora. More recently, the names of sports personalities of ethnic origin, usually competing for their adopted country, have shown the success of the Igbo and Yoruba diaspora communities; specifically the names Kris Akabuisi in British athletics, and Akeem, ‘the dream’ Olajuwon, in American basketball readily come to mind.

Igbos in the Diaspora

Living in a hinterland region has meant that the Igbo’s history of contact with the outer world is much more recent than that of ethnic groups with coastal access, such as the Yoruba in southwestern Nigeria. Before the expansion of trading activities brought about by increased contact with the Portuguese and other European traders during the slave trade, the rainforest habitation of the Igbo and their relatively insular lifestyle based on subsistence farming and limited inter-clan trade relations, afforded most of them little opportunity (except for occasional wars) to expand their horizons outwards to new areas of influence in trade, politics or culture. The Awka ironsmiths, Arochukwu ‘medicine men’ and possibly the Onitsha traders, to name a few exceptions whose distinctive professions were in demand in many parts of Igboland and elsewhere, were able to travel farther afield, although there are no reports of substantial Igbo communities established in West Africa or elsewhere in this ‘pre-diaspora’ period, prior to direct contact with the West from the slave trade onwards.

The First Diaspora Era

The first period of diaspora, comprising the era from the slave trade until the colonial period, had a direct effect on Igbos and their global outlook. The location of Igboland proved critical to its involvement in human traffic as much of the area became criss-crossed by ‘slave routes’, from the hinterland to the sea. Discussion of the slave trade is beyond the scope of this paper, however there is clear evidence of the transfer of thousands of Igbos amongst other Africans affected by the trade. Also crucial were the records and narratives of freed slaves, missionaries and others about these events (Equiano, 1793; Waddell, 1970). In each of these cases the communities formed by the dispersion and resettlement were neither unique nor possibly identifiable as a discrete ethnic community: the experience of Igbo speakers was the same as many others in West Africa.

However Gugler (1961) cites the first instance of an Igbo Union in existence in Freetown in the late 19th century; this and subsequent Igbo communities were established by groups who felt affinity ties with southeastern Nigeria. Aside from these activities in this era there were also the autonomous actions of agents such as the Anglican CMS (Church Missionary Society) and the United Free Church of Scotland (Presbyterian), who sent chosen Africans (Igbos in this case) to theological colleges.
and medical schools in the UK (for example, Africanus Horton was the first black medical student in Edinburgh University).

The Second Diaspora Era

This period, from colonial times until the first few years of the independent nation-state of Nigeria, directly affected the Igbo. Having found the benefits of western education most Igbo actively grasped the opportunities and vistas that education could offer. Much of the Nigerian colonial civil service had lower grade clerical positions filled by Igbo in northern and western Nigeria. Many commentators such as (1994) and Peil (1992) note the significant numbers of Igbo who took up residence in ‘Hausaland’ and ‘Yorubaland’ over a relatively short period of time from the late 1940s to the early 1960s. At the international level, the race for higher education, or the ‘Golden Fleece’, began in earnest as Igbo families and clan groups who could afford it sent their ‘illustrious’ sons for further education abroad. Other careers such as joining the army or taking up a commission with the merchant navy also attracted Igbo men and, in the latter case, became a catalyst in the creation of one of the oldest Igbo diaspora communities which was formed in Liverpool, England in 1935 (Uka, 1992).

The diaspora Igbo communities, which existed in this era, principally in the United Kingdom, other parts of Nigeria and West Africa did have a distinctive bias. Although other groups, such as the Yorubas, Efik and, to a lesser extent, the Hausas, all had community networks in places abroad where significant numbers of them lived, the identity, form and function of many of the Igbo Improvement Unions was unique. Primarily, these Igbo diaspora communities formed ‘home town’ improvement unions that had two principal aims. The first was to look after the welfare of kin affiliated to the group abroad (the most important function being help with transporting the body of deceased members or their close family ‘home’ for burial). The second was to improve the welfare and development of the home town community through the construction of schools and hospitals and sometimes contributing to scholarship funds to enable ‘illustrious’ sons of the soil to become doctors and lawyers for the greater glory of the village community (West African Builder, 1961; Achebe, 1960). The ethnic ‘Ibo Union’, although also in existence during this period, had more of a political role than a community focus. Thus as a diaspora group, Igbo seem to have been more concerned with the local issues of home town politics than the wider issues related to ethnicity and political power and usually became a member of one’s home town union.

The Third Diaspora Era

The third and differentiating diaspora period for Igbo occurred during the forced migration before, during and immediately after the Nigerian/Biafran civil war of 1966-70. The preceding ethnic cleansing pogroms that took place during this period have been discussed by others (Amadi, 1978; Ojukwu, 1989; Ikeazor, 1997). These events forced thousands of Igbo to flee their homes in northern and to a lesser extent western Nigeria, principally to return to the core Igbo ‘homeland’ region in southeastern Nigeria, but also in some cases to neighbouring West African states or further afield, principally the US and the UK. In many ways, this parallels the experience of the Ugandan Asians at the height of the Idi Amin dictatorship. Many Igbo found themselves having to redefine their relationship with their former diasporic communities (in northern and western Nigeria).
By the end of the crisis in the early 1970s those who returned found that their identities had been reassigned from being local members of multiethnic communities, to being sojourners in their former diaspora communities. The still tense issue of ‘abandoned property’ in cities such as Port Harcourt and Lagos highlighted the continuing plight of Igbo returnees who found their assets had been ‘re-possessed’ in their absence. From this period, the ‘myth of return’, which had begun to recede from Igbo city dwellers in the 1960s, came back to the fore. Most telling of the level of integration prior to 1966 was the multiethnic name of one of the key 1966 coup figures – Major Kaduna Nzeogwu, born of Igbo parents in northern Nigeria. The name Kaduna is a northern town whilst Nzeogwu is Igbo; this combination was unusual. Since then Igbos elsewhere have developed concrete plans to ‘return’ to their home towns at retirement, kick-starting the building boom in villages throughout Eastern Nigeria from the 1970s to the present day (see Uduku, 1996).

Residence and spatial definitions of territory were also attenuated as Igbos who returned and re-settled in host communities in northern and western Nigeria were more likely to live in close proximity in certain city areas such as the Tudun Wada and Sabon Gari neighbourhoods of northern Nigerian cities, and Ajegunle, and the former ‘Maroko’ in Lagos. These areas had often been original non-indigenous settlements, but since the 1970s they have become more so (Peil, 1991:37-38; Schwerdtfeger, 1982). Life for many returnees in close proximity with others from the same ethnic group further contributed to the development of a ‘supra diaspora’, or Igbo national (as opposed to home town union) identity. As the Igbo community has often been able to organise itself effectively for evacuation or defence in times of conflict, this has been a useful strategy in towns in northern Nigeria where continuing ethnic and religious related conflicts remain.

The civil war and its consequences thus worked to enforce stronger ethnic identities and allegiances. It also ensured that for Igbos in the diaspora within Nigeria their new situation and identification with their host community was seen as clearly temporary or transient. Clearly with Nigeria’s shifting geopolitics, one’s relationship with one’s home town and with other Igbo kin was all that could be assured. The Igbo villages and their home town development unions became the major beneficiaries of this adverse situation as development activities were actively channelled to them. Economically then, the aftermath of this period was a shift of focus in planned financial activities towards both individual house building and also capital-intensive home town development projects in Igbo villages. Thus the old Umania Development Union completed the electrification of the village in 1974 and commissioned a self-financed borehole providing pipeborne water at each hamlet in 1984.

In the international sphere Igbos in the diaspora, most of whom were students, also found themselves affected by events in Nigeria. There were also a limited number of Biafran/Nigerian war ‘refugees’ who managed to escape to Europe and the US leading to the transformation of Igbo communities within the UK and US. The former home town development unions – combined to work with Biafra Unions – now became places of information, news and fund raising for the ‘Biafran cause’. Thus the greater supra Igbo identity came to the fore in importance during this crucial period which in turn had a long term effect on the Diaspora community abroad.

For some Igbos, the civil war and its aftermath simply increased their length of stay abroad until they and families could return safely; for others, the war served to delay and eventually result in some families and individuals giving up the idea of returning to Nigeria. The fantastic, but short-lived oil boom which followed the war, however,
was enough to ensure that most Igboos living abroad returned to Nigeria during this period; however, many retained their international ties and relationships with Igbo Unions abroad. The Igbo Union minutes for Liverpool (1998) record visits of former residents who have now ‘returned home’ but keep ties with the UK.

Similar to the diaspora groups within Nigeria, the effects of the Nigerian/Biafran war also influenced the positioning and politics of Igbo groups abroad who had had working relations with other Nigeria ethnic group associations. In Liverpool, the Igbo Union broke off relations with the Nigeria Union (1998) which supported the Federal side in the civil war (Uka, 1996). For many also, the ‘myth’ of Nigerian unity and the principle of being able to settle and work anywhere in Nigeria was abandoned as the ‘return’ home to Nigeria had certain formal or informal caveats. Ethnic quotas were more likely to be adhered to for jobs outside one’s area of origin, and often top government posts were awarded on political and not meritocratic grounds.

Thus international returnees were likely to immediately spend time living and re-establishing contacts in their home towns, many having already built houses there whilst still abroad. They would then either take up government jobs close to home (usual for doctors, lawyers and other professionals) or, having developed a home town base, would then go on to pursue private sector jobs or become self-employed as entrepreneurs in the economic ‘boom’ towns of Lagos, Kaduna, and Port Harcourt, where they often became part of the Igbo diaspora community in these urban areas (Port Harcourt had been part of the Eastern region prior to the civil war, but became Rivers State of Nigeria in 1967).

Economically and politically, this phase of diaspora Igboos initiated the contemporary organisation of the Igbo unions. With their exposure to western education and employment, the idea of development plans for home towns, investment in small- and medium-scale industry, was pursued with the harnessing of capital from diaspora-domiciled Igboos. For the first time since the Biafra/Nigerian war, there was also the development of an Igbo shared political identity. This era coincided with Nigeria’s short-lived return to civil rule from 1979 to 1983 in which Igboos in the diaspora helped fund ethnic Igbo ‘Peoples Club’ movements which was a precursor to the unbanning of political parties. The Peoples’ Club movement became part of the Eastern dominated NPP, (Nigerian People’s Party) which captured the most seats in the two Igbo States in the 1979, and 1983 elections, before the coup d’etat and reinstatement of military rule later on in 1983.

The Fourth Diaspora Era

The final era of the diaspora dates from the collapse of the Nigerian economy in the mid-1980s to the present. Over this period, the nature and character of the Igbo diaspora has changed substantially. Within Nigeria, recent clashes in Kaduna, Kano and Lagos have meant that ethnic groups have had to work hard to ensure their members were evacuated or protected in ethnically diverse areas.

The issues relating to most West African communities in the international diaspora today are immigration, employment and secure forms of remittances to home countries. These issues clearly are important for Igboos abroad. Few want to return immediately to Nigeria given its deteriorating economic and political situation; however, the idea of eventually returning remains a goal to be strived for. Those who do return, tend to be wealthy enough to have covered their financial odds with secure offshore investments and have dual or more nationalities. In some local authorities in
the UK there has been a near 100 per cent increase in residence of black Africans (Daley, 1998).

This more permanent nature of residence away from ‘home’ in the diaspora brings about generational differences. Whilst most older Igbos in their 50s still express a wish to go ‘home’, their offspring, many born in the diaspora, are less sure about where their loyalties lie. Their children – the grandchildren of the first residents – are often totally assimilated within the diaspora community, although occasionally expressing an interest in finding their ‘roots’. For diaspora communities nearer to Eastern Nigeria such as those settled elsewhere in Nigeria, and in both West and Southern Africa, ‘home’ is still relatively nearby, with such groups often returning on annual Christmas visits causing gridlock on major routes into the region.

Economically migratory employment and remittances go hand in hand. For most West African migrants abroad, there is the need to work in whatever job is available, to exist and most importantly, to enable remittances to be sent ‘home’. For Igbo, the traditional home town unions have retained their validity and existence into the 21st century with annual ‘New Yam’ Festivals and fund raising events taking place. In the mid-1990s micro-credit banking was introduced in eastern Nigeria. For many local communities the major capital base required for these banks has come from diaspora residents able to contribute significant amounts due to favourable hard currency exchange rates (Old Umuahia Development Union, 2001).

There has also been the re-emergence of the supra-ethnic union – the World Igbo Congress – which has socio-economic as well as political aims. Now in its seventh year, it is based mainly in the US with contacts throughout Western Europe (World Igbo Congress, 2000). In its latest 2001 communiqué there are calls for Igbo to invest in education technology and small industries in Eastern Nigeria (World Igbo Congress, 2001).

In today’s global economy those working in the international diaspora have become closer to ‘home’. Electronic money transfers, fast intercontinental air travel, and amongst Igbo and other Anglophone West Africans, the primacy of English as the international mode of communication makes life in the diaspora and links with ‘home’ much easier today than it would have been in the 1940s. However, there is a confusion in identities – especially amongst the young. On the one hand, there is the global bombardment of ‘multi-cultural’ media images such as Benneiton and Coca-Cola and, in America, the public acceptance of mythical identities such as the Afrocentric’s promotion of the ‘Kwanza’ movement. On the other hand, there are the more damaging stereotyped images of the perceived hopelessness of Africa and ‘Africans’ as well as that of Nigerians as criminals.

For many in the diaspora there has been the pressure to take on their adopted country’s nationality and assimilate into the ‘mainstream’ community, only paying lip service to the discrete diaspora identities. In the UK, the controversial ‘Tebbit test’ – named after the MP who proposed it – meant that the true test of ‘Britishness’ for assimilated migrants at for instance, sporting events such as cricket, was to clap in support of the British team and not one's original home team town. In the US and Canada, often well-paid employment is either conditional on, or gives preference to, those with full nationality. For many professionals, this has often been the only way to ensure career progress; for others, the solution has been to adopt the identity required of the moment.
The later generations of residents of the diaspora, have thus begun to undergo the classical forms of assimilation, mainly because discrete ethnic identities are difficult to maintain and often have little to offer within a global milieu. Furthermore, societal norms and mores become difficult to enforce within the diaspora community if they are in opposition to the dominant moral context of the main community. In Liverpool, the Igbo Union has a dwindling membership as the younger Igbos, predominantly diaspora born, have no affiliation with the Union which still conducts its business in Igbo, a language few of the younger group speaks, remains sexually segregated (the women have a female ‘mother’s’ union) and often meets on a Sunday evening in direct conflict with the weekly television airing of Liverpool United football matches – the city’s major sport (Igbo Union, 1998).

**Igbos in the 21st Century Diaspora**

*Ndi Igbo Kwené* (literally translated as ‘greetings to the entire Igbo population present’) is the rallying cry for Igbo meetings. Whilst the negative aspects of the global city suggest that we will soon witness a mono-cultural ‘meltdown’ (aside from the events of 11 September 2001), there are also practical indicators that tell a different story. The Igbos are a middle-level diaspora community by African standards and have come to the situation rather late. The Yorubas, Hausa, Fanti and other West African ethnic groups, have older, and in the first two cases, demographically larger communities than the Igbo. The nature of the engagement and linkages with ‘home’ and the diaspora community ‘abroad’ however is already changing. The Community Association or Development Union, as a welfare net for its first generation indigenes ‘abroad’, is unlikely to change mainly because the social functions which reify identity and culture remain in demand by this group; future ‘diaspora born’ Igbos however have a different relationship to these structures.

The semi-autonomous nature of the Igbo community and its strong ties with kinship sub groups also work to strengthen ties between diaspora and home, as conceptually the relationship to home town tends to be stronger than the supra groups of (Igbo) ethnicity and nation. The fluidity of Igbo culture means that much of the cultural and social mores, which exist in more organised African diaspora groups such as the Yoruba community, are applied less rigidly. The ability to assimilate where necessary and ‘make do’ where required means that the community already exists minimally between the modern and the traditional. Also, the effects of the civil war episode have served to reinforce amongst many the need for an organised community in diaspora situations.

Economically also, the Igbo’s success in rebuilding their business interests in the informal and more recently the formal small and medium enterprise sector since the end of the civil war, has been phenomenal. In Nnewi for example, the Igbo community have established a motor parts industry that relies on ethnic ties to reduce transportation costs (World Bank, 2000:171). The growth of these economic empires show no sign of slowing down with the information and telecommunications sector looming in their sights. Nigeria’s continuing political uncertainty remains the only deterrent to growth, although the strategic targeting of most Igbo diaspora investment in ‘home towns’ has meant that much of the crises taking place in Nigeria’s cities have yet to affect eastern Nigeria.

Obviously, as the location of ‘Igboland’ is in southeastern Nigeria, its existence ultimately is influenced by events in all of Nigeria. The uncertainty and lack of resolution of the current crisis in Nigeria therefore has a strong bearing on the future
of Igbo development and that of other ethnic groups. It is to be seen whether this situation and the full assimilation pressures from adopted countries of the diaspora will result in future generations redefining the community’s identity within their different world frame. A key lament at the World Igbo Congress has been the loss of ability to communicate in Igbo by younger Igbos. Their solution was to move a resolution to establish Saturday Igbo language schools in all cities in the US with a significant Igbo population; the results are yet to be recorded (World Igbo Congress, 2001).

**Conclusion: O rugo niömume** (the time has come to act)

This paper has assembled strands of information and factual evidence about the specific historical and socio-economic development of the Igbo Diaspora within a local and global context. Its thesis has been that the Igbo community in the diaspora has shown remarkable characteristics of evolution and development and continued attachment to their geographical region ‘Igboland’. When compared to other Nigerian and African ethnic groups, their development of the home town union structure and most recently the World Igbo Congress, has been unique.

The relative middle-level, ‘meso’ size of the community and its late arrival onto the global scene seems not to have substantially affected its progress and development. Furthermore, the acausal, relatively un-hierarchic nature of Igbo culture and society has enabled its diaspora community to adapt a flexible attitude to change based on the experiences of the Biafran/Nigerian civil war which served to further influence these attitudes to change – mainly through it being a catalyst to forge a united group Igbo identity. Since the end of the crisis this identity has survived fragmentation and conflict to remain a unifying aspiration for many diaspora Igbos despite their differences. The impetus of the groups and supra-ethnic bodies such as the World Igbo Congress, remains to further the development of Igboland socially, economically, and politically to push for Igbo representation at presidential level (World Igbo Congress, 1991).

In the 21st century, the Igbo diaspora has become more dispersed throughout all continents and most countries in the world. They have become an established international diaspora with the US being home to the majority. With the continuing socio-political crisis in Nigeria this diaspora has become formalised. There are now two established generations of Igbos in the diaspora in much of the US and parts of Europe such as the United Kingdom.

For first generation diaspora Igbos, the day to day issues of employment, immigration, and secure remittance facilities remain uppermost in their struggle to adapt to their adopted country. Unfortunately for some, their association with crime and the underworld has had a negative effect on the group profile of many Igbos and West Africans in general. Except for port cities such as Liverpool who can trace an older community, most first generation diaspora Igbos are now aged over 50, whilst the second generation, many of whom were born in the adopted countries are in their late teens to early 20s.

For the majority of this group however there is a socio-economic class and race struggle to overcome with only a very few having the status to gain entrance to middle or upper class society. Most have a constant struggle to establish their status, often working in the harsh unregulated employment sector, where immigrant labour is welcome but grossly underpaid. With often irregular immigration papers, many
are illegal or ‘invisible’ persons to the official authorities and therefore are open to economic and social exploitation at all levels. Furthermore, as ethnic blacks there is also the racism attached to colour that many encounter, in their socio-economic transactions with the 21st century Western economy, similar to early diaspora communities who had to survive in 19th century Europe and the New World.

For the more established Igbos in the diaspora, the politics and long term socio-economic development of Igbo land have increasingly come to the fore – as seen by the creation and objectives of the World Igbo Congress. There has also been the evolution of an ‘international’ elite in the Igbo diaspora, with figures such as Chinua Achebe, Emeka Anyaoku, and Olu Oguibe, all of whom live ‘abroad’, although identifying with their African if not Igbo ‘roots’.

As a second generation of Igbos reach maturity, new issues of identity and relationships to ‘Igboland’ are having to be redefined. The connection to Igbo land remains strong as most visit eastern Nigeria during vacations, and the home town union movements ensure that there is regular contact with other Igbo families in the diaspora. However, issues of dual identities and loyalties can often pose a problem for diaspora-educated Igbo youths. The proposed Saturday Igbo language schools for American Igbo youths will need more support and relevance to begin to successfully espouse and promote a 21st century Igbo identity, relevant to a sophisticated youth. Also in countries with smaller, less established, diaspora populations this may not be economically or logistically possible.

Now is the time to consider what the future holds. For the time being, the majority of the Igbo diaspora will continue to operate within a global society exploring and reconstructing their identities and economic status at home and abroad, within a constantly changing landscape.

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* Igbo Buk ‘ike translated literally means ‘Igbes are strong’ or, more loosely, ‘powerful’ which alludes to their influence – in this case on the global stage.

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