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MIGRANTS OR SETTLERS?
THE IBO IN LONDON

DOROTHY JERROME

INTRODUCTION

There are almost three thousand Ibo in London, with men outnumbering
women in the ratio of three to two. They tend to be between twenty-five and
forty years old and to have been in Britain for between five and ten years.¹ The
majority came to obtain qualifications which would bring status on their return to
Nigeria, but the Nigeria-Biafra war interrupted the process and as a result they are
still here. If the defining characteristic of the immigrant is the tendency to remain in
the new country, regardless of the intention to return, the Ibo are not immigrants
but a migrant community in which departure is the norm although individual migrants
make considerable investments in the new environment and some may never realise
their ambition to return. In terms of the degree of their economic incorporation,
cultural distinctiveness, ideological commitment to a ‘traditional’ way of life and
belief in their own superiority in relation to outsiders, the Ibo have much in common
with East African Asians; the difference lies in their declared intention to leave
Britain and the success of many in achieving this ambition.

BACKGROUND

The activities of Ibo in London and their attitudes towards Britain have gone through
several changes. Their history is also the history of the relationship between Britain
and Nigeria. It is the history of European trade with West Africa in the fifteenth,
sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, of missionary contact and the
process of colonisation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, of the attainment
of Nigerian independence in recent years, and of the gradual severing of ties which
bound Britain to her colonial subjects and confirmed certain rights upon them, of
which the most meaningful was unrestricted entry into Britain.

Before this right was curtailed in 1962, Ibo had been coming to Britain for a variety
of reasons. Comparatively few of the early arrivals remain today, for the majority
came to obtain academic qualifications and returned to Nigeria on the attainment of
their objective. The number of Ibo students in the UK rose sharply in the late 1950s
as regional and national independence approached. Some had come in the years
immediately after the war and returned to take up lucrative posts. The coming of
regional independence in 1957 and national independence three years later contributed
to the flow of students. Prospective lawyers, civil servants, secretaries and teachers
were sent to acquire the skills necessary to run the government departments and
educational institutions of the new state. The peak for entry came in the period
1959–61.

Before Nigerian independence in 1960 and British legislation to control immigra-
tion in 1962, Ibo had regarded Britain as a country to which they could come freely
and in which they would be welcomed. On the whole, they came in order to acquire academic and professional qualifications which would boost their status at home. They did not see Britain as a land of opportunity where fortunes could be made.

The Ibo maintain that, unlike the Yoruba and West Indians, they have never travelled to Britain to find work. So strong is the ideological emphasis on self-improvement through education, that, until the Nigeria-Biafra war affected their circumstances, they tended to regard with scorn any Ibo who was not pursuing a course of some kind. Disapproval was extended even to those who worked in order to finance their studies. In spite of this, paid employment as a prelude to study frequently was the pattern. A man who did not enjoy sponsorship by his town union or other body, and who had no private resources, came intending to finance his studies by paid employment. In other cases this course of action was forced upon him by unfortunate circumstances.

The Immigration Act of 1962 curtailed the numbers who could come into Britain and work for a living. It thus limited the chances of Ibo men who wanted primarily to study but had to work first in order to do so. On the other hand, it indirectly stimulated the migration of wives whose entry as dependents was unrestricted and whose income from full-time employment would help to maintain their full-time student husbands.

These obstacles did not deter would-be students who looked forward to the huge dividends in Nigeria which, in the early 1960s, rewarded the person with qualifications in appropriate subjects. In many cases the qualifications they sought were not obtainable in Nigeria. Even where this was not the case, qualifications acquired abroad, particularly in Britain, carried considerable prestige.

Of the current generation of Ibo men and women in London, the majority came in the first half of the sixties. Half of the women arrived in the three year period concluded in April 1967 by the imposition of a naval blockade on the Eastern Region of Nigeria (Biafra), followed shortly afterwards by an air war. The men tend to have been in Britain slightly longer.

The reason for migration given most frequently by both sexes is study (65%). It was the sole reason for over four-fifths of the men and the predominant reason for a third of the women. The most popular courses among the men were law (18%); engineering (12.3%); accountancy and management (each 7.6%); banking and medicine (each 6%). The remaining 40% of students were taking courses in, among other things, insurance, journalism, surveying, and transport studies. The women most frequently chose nursing (33%); secretarial courses (16%) and catering and home economics (11.3%).

Almost as many women came to marry (31%) as to study. A further 21% came to join a husband, and few came in the company of their spouses.

A comparatively small number of people (4.5%) came with the object of working, mostly for Nigerian organisations in Britain. A few, however, came independently in the years after the Second World War, to make a living as best they could. They were motivated by the desire to travel and see the world, and the 'mother country' in particular. They included tailors, retailers, and others in the category of self-employed.

Despite these intentions, the current pattern of activities consists of full-time employment and a combination of work and study. Less than a fifth of the men are engaged in full-time study. A quarter combine study with work, and over half do no studying at all. Even fewer of the women (just over 10%) are full-time students. Less than a fifth are following part-time courses. The majority, nearly three-quarters of the whole, are working. The rest are housewives who neither study nor work outside the home.
The reason for the transformation from students to workers is the Nigeria-Biafra war, which broke out in 1967, interrupting their studies and disrupting their plans. But for the war most of the people here now would have qualified in 3 or 5 years and returned home, according to the pattern established by their predecessors.

At the start of the field work for this study, some eighteen months after the collapse of Biafra, it seemed likely that the war had dramatically affected the future of Ibo in London, and that the period of the research would be crucial, a turning point in the history of the community. It seemed likely that a high water mark had just been reached, following which the community would dwindle away to nothing as Ibo already here gradually finished their studies and left, and none came to replace them. Alternatively, it was possible that a first generation of Ibo immigrants was becoming established, forced to remain in Britain by the conditions in their home country. Certainly, the community had by this time acquired an air of permanence, despite the renewal of contact with kin lost during the war; the trips to Nigeria 'to see how things stood', and some permanent departures for home by people with good prospects.

A detailed analysis of the current situation indicates several possibilities for Ibo in London. The most probable outcome of the war would seem to be the gradual decline of the community as it is now, with the departure of most Ibo families for their country of origin. The considerable investment—financial, social and psychological—in the life of the host society may be explained in terms of Ibo pragmatism, a quality noted by other students of Ibo culture (e.g. Ottenberg 1959). The extent of this investment, together with its converse—the degree of involvement with other Ibo—takes up the remainder of the article. Attention is given first to Ibo settlement patterns, their social networks and voluntary associations.

**Neighbourhoods, Networks and Associations**

The Ibo are not concentrated in a single residential area of London. Neither are they evenly dispersed throughout the region. There are local concentrations both south and north of the River Thames, in Clapham, Balham, Tooting, Brixton and Stockwell and in Stamford Hill, Stoke Newington, Islington and Finsbury Park.

There must be few Ibo who are not within walking distance of an Ibo neighbour, and many, especially in areas of high density such as Islington, who are in shouting distance. In what were once large, well-kept Victorian family houses in Dalston, Islington and Finsbury Park, now the much written-about rooming houses of the twilight zones, Ibo live in close proximity with Yoruba, West Indians, Irish and English residents. In areas like this there are adjacent houses each occupied by three or four Ibo families. In other places, by contrast, an Ibo family may occasionally be the sole occupants of a large semi-detached house in a quiet suburban street, where they are the only non-English or non-white residents.

Despite local concentrations, the overall picture is one of physical dispersal. The structure of social relationships follows a similar pattern. Ibo networks are loose-knit. A person interacts with a wide range of others who may or may not know each other. Often they are related only through him or her. The guests invited to a party may include people from the same village, colleagues, in-laws, tenants and neighbours, and various friends who were until that time strangers to each other. During the Nigeria-Biafra war massive meetings facilitated interaction on a large scale, and most people's range of acquaintances was broadened dramatically. Yet it is still
possible for an Ibo to meet for the first time a former class-mate or colleague who has been in London for a number of years, his presence unknown.

The pattern of interaction has changed over the years, reflecting demographic trends and changing economic circumstances. Long-established residents say that in the 1950s 'everyone knew everyone else'. The British Council provided the focal point for student activity. Single men and married men whose wives had stayed behind sought each other's company. Nowadays home ties and family responsibilities restrict movement and the routine of work and study leaves little time for other activity.

Associational life is equally limited. The current situation represents a remarkable decline in activity since 1970 when the war came to an end. During the war voluntary associations had proliferated at an amazing rate, and the existing organisations based on community of origin and national political interests had stepped up their activities.

The new voluntary associations were formed for a variety of purposes: to provide moral support, to promote professional interests, to achieve a particular goal such as the evacuation of Ibo children from Biafra, and particularly to raise money for the war effort. After 1970 the Ibo, a people noted for their reserve, retreated sharply from their war-time intimacy. Attendance at clan meetings dropped sharply, with many unions ceasing activities altogether. Money-raising was no longer a collective effort. Individuals worked independently to restore depleted family fortunes. The associations of lawyers and nurses, of management specialists and engineers, of chartered secretaries and caterers shared the fate of the local organisations. So did the religious and convivial associations and the special interest groups.

The decline of formal organisations, the economic incorporation and physical dispersal of the Ibo might prompt the conclusion that they are not, after all, an interacting unit but simply a social aggregate who have only their origins in common. A brief review of housing and welfare arrangements, at recreational, economic and kinship activities, however, reveals the opposite: that although the distinguishing characteristics of the Ibo community in the 1960s are no longer in evidence, the Ibo have retained their separate identity, expressed in new ways.

Before examining this proposition with respect to economic activities, housing arrangements and social status, a brief look at the relationship between Ibo and non-Ibo is called for.

**RELATIONSHIPS WITH NON-IBO**

Interaction with other ethnic groups, either black minorities or whites, takes a variety of forms. Interaction with the English mainly occurs in the place of work and other structured situations (e.g. landlord-tenant relations, college lecturer-student relations). Occasionally a fellow tenant or class-mate is also a friend, but relationships with the English are on the whole specific and instrumental. Involvement of other kinds is not sought or desired.

Relationships with members of other ethnic minorities—for example, Indian, Nigerian and West Indian—are rather different. In some situations they are fellow blacks, fellow students or fellow Nigerians, who sink their differences to assert their common interests. In others they are 'those Yoruba' or 'those Asians...'. Formal interactions between Ibo and other Nigerian groups took place until 1966 in the context of student organisations like the West African Students' Union. They mixed
informally also under the auspices of the British Council and other social clubs, as class-mates and as fellow tenants. Occasionally they intermarried. Interaction with Yoruba has become attenuated since the outbreak of hostilities in Nigeria in 1966 but still persists between former colleagues, class-mates and co-tenants. Relationships between men and West Indian women occasionally end in marriage.

**ECONOMIC ACTIVITY: MAKING ENDS MEET**

Some Ibo make a living by supplying the Ibo community with services such as housing and goods such as indigenous foodstuffs. Others—lawyers, solicitors, retailers, doctors, dressmakers, and caterers—have Ibo clients but they do not rely solely on them for their income. A more important source of income is the external economy, where Ibo are part of the occupational structure of the host society. Ibo engage in a wide variety of occupations, at all levels of skill and responsibility. Two-fifths of the women are engaged in such activities as nursing, social work, teaching, librarianship, laboratory work and computer programming (the Registrar General’s intermediate category). A quarter are engaged in skilled non-manual occupations as clerks and typists, draughtswomen, boutique owners, and punch card operators. In the skilled manual category are dressmakers and canteen cooks, accounting for an eighth of the women. Finally, in the partly skilled and unskilled group are a small number who work as packers, telephonists, machinists and so on. The largest single concentration occurs in nursing and secretarial work, with catering in third place.

Among the men the distribution by economic category is similar but with a larger proportion—a tenth—involved in the professional and high administrative category. This includes doctors, lecturers, professional engineers, lawyers, solicitors, a professional economist, a bank manager, and the director of a commonwealth agency. The largest concentration occurs among routine white-collar workers, who hold jobs in the Civil Service and public corporations. A third of the men hold jobs in the intermediate category—as accountants and bank clerks, insurance salesmen and executive officers in the Civil Service. There are also a number of teachers, librarians, journalists, and laboratory assistants. The remainder fall into the skilled manual, and partly skilled or unskilled categories. The former includes a high proportion of mechanics and maintenance engineers. The latter consists of postmen, ticket collectors, fitters and cleaners.¹

There is often a discrepancy between the qualifications of the worker and the level of skill required for the job. Women are more likely to be using their qualifications than men. As nurses, secretaries, cooks and dressmakers they are using their skills, though not perhaps to the full extent. At all levels below the highest there are people qualified for professions they cannot enter. In many cases the work they do is in a related field but requires a low level of skill. A qualified accountant may work as an accounts clerk; an engineer as a fitter for British Rail; a barrister or arts graduate as a clerical officer in the Civil Service, and so on. Perhaps the greatest discrepancy exists in the lowest category. At least five Ibo with qualifications in law (one with a higher degree) are working as postmen.

The sociological implications of these activities emerge when considered in conjunction with people's financial commitments, their life style, and the social significance they attach to occupation and level of income.

Since the war the Ibo in London have been faced with demands from relations and friends in Nigeria for capital to restore lost businesses and goods to replace lost
property and to meet the shortage of such consumer items as clothes. Demands come constantly from people unaware of the problems faced by their sons and daughters abroad in meeting the rising cost of living. Accommodation and maintenance, tuition fees and childminders' wages, are some of the items which have to be found from humble salaries.

Two strategies have been adopted to bridge the gap between income from paid employment and the level of expenditure which is required after the war, both to meet demands for assistance from home and in conformity with new aspirations for social status. One is to start a private business. The other is to purchase a house.

House purchase is regarded by the Ibo as a form of investment. It is a means of maximising resources by avoiding the weekly payment of rent, and by letting surplus rooms to tenants. It is a way of improving both one's material circumstances and one's status within the Ibo community. To become a landlord is a status attribute. This point will be developed shortly.

Of the couples in the sample known to be house owners (131), over 80% acquired their property after 1968; only 17% were house owners before the war. Before the war it was considered adequate for a family consisting of parents and child to live in a single furnished room. The period of residence was expected to be short and there was no need to acquire property. There was, in any case, no money available for such a purchase, since most people were full-time students living on allowances received from home. The rush to buy houses began in the late 1960s when the outcome of the war, and hence any future back home, seemed uncertain. When Biafra collapsed, many people resigned themselves to a five or ten year wait in Britain, while the situation clarified itself or for the prospects of a return to improve.

The small group of men—13% of the sample—who own more than one property view housing primarily as a business, unlike the majority of house owners who only seek better accommodation for themselves and their families. Most of the multiple house owners purchased their first house before the war and the second less than four years after the first, sometimes with startling rapidity. More than once, a property tycoon was encountered in the field, and there were others who were landlords on a grand scale. There is at least one Ibo property company, formed by a group of associates holding shares.

While not quite in this class, nearly two-thirds—59%—of house owners let off an upstairs room to a tenant, whose rent helps to pay off the mortgage. People who rent accommodation are generally single, or newly-wed couples who are saving up for a house (or plan to return to Nigeria shortly) or older than average couples with large families and inadequate incomes.

The relationship of landlord and tenant is not welcomed much by either side but over half of the people interviewed were in a position of accepting accommodation

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**Table 1: Year of Purchase of First House in Britain**

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sole occupant</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>37 (28%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living with tenant¹</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>77 (59%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple house owner</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>17 (13%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>2 (1%)</td>
<td>21 (16%)</td>
<td>48 (37%)</td>
<td>60² (46%)</td>
<td>131 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹ Not part of household, e.g. excluding sisters-in-law who eat with family.
² Including 9 currently negotiating mortgages.
from or offering it to a fellow Ibo. There is no obligation to house other Ibo or even fellow townspeople\(^1\) (only a minority of the 94 landlords in the sample had townspeople as tenants). A townsman who fails to pay his rent can be prosecuted only at the expense of the landlord’s reputation in local circles which he normally wishes to preserve.

Some landlords refuse to have Ibo tenants at all, fearing that it will be impossible to enforce contractual obligations. It is felt that an Ibo tenant will make unreasonable demands and accuse the landlord of exploiting him when they are not met. Fear of exploitation exists on the other side, too. Many people interviewed would not live in the house of a townsman or other Ibo, even if it were offered, for fear that they would be unable to defend their contractual rights and that the landlord would manipulate ethnic ties in his own favour.

There are, however, cases of successful arrangements between townspeople where the diffuse tie between landlord and tenant has stabilised and strengthened the link. There are also Ibo who claim accommodation in a fellow Ibo’s house as a right, and the obligation to house them may be difficult to avoid, if it is known that the landlord has rooms available.

The conflict of expectations produces disputes which reach the attention of friends and local people with influence or, in the last resort, the Rent Tribunal and the law courts. The pattern of dispute settlement is interesting for the light it throws on the definition of interests. It reveals the existence of social boundaries and uncovers the basis for action and identification within the community. The extent to which the protagonists conform to Ibo norms or the norms of the wider society offers an index of group affiliation and hence the degree of assimilation into the culture of the wider society.

**Disputes between Landlords and Tenants**

Rules exist for the settlement of disputes between Ibo and they apply most strongly to people from the same town. Ideally, townspeople are never seen in dispute by outsiders. They talk the matter over and soon discover a distant relationship or some other reason why they cannot afford to part company. Recourse to outsiders, as in court cases, brings disgrace to families at home and must be avoided for that reason (and for the reason that it is typically British, hence undesirable). The favoured procedure for settlement is an orderly confrontation between the disputants and their supporters. If this fails to produce results the wronged individual writes to his parents asking them to negotiate for payment with his adversary’s people. They either do so or write back telling him to wait until he is home to settle the matter, for

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\(^1\) This figure comprises: 7 service tenancies; 18 Local Authority; 4 Charitable Housing Trusts and Hostels; 15 private landlords.
'we know where he was born', i.e. we know where he can be found, and will get the money in the end.

Despite the ideals of forbearance and the efforts towards peaceful resolution of conflict, behaviour between townspeople does erupt into disputes and breaches of solidarity; in some cases action and counteraction exacerbate a difficult situation to a point where intervention by friends or others is necessary. A dispute between a tenant and landlord in south London in 1970 was finally settled by litigation:

One party came from Onitsha town, the other from a neighbouring community. The landlord had several complaints against his tenant: he did not pay his rent, and he behaved improperly with the wife of another tenant who came from the landlord's own town. Feeling responsible for 'our wife' the landlord informed his townspeople of the errant tenant's ways. He also removed the man's doors and windows. The tenant retaliated by attacking the landlord and his wife with a hammer. At this point the people who had been trying to reconcile the two withdrew and the matter went to court. The tenant was fined £40 and bound over to keep the peace.

In other cases the initiative is taken by the tenant. Landlords are not infrequently reported to the Rent Tribunal or subjected to visits by Public Health officials. In retaliation the landlord himself takes legal action, obtaining an eviction order.

The pattern of settlement of a dispute varies widely. Consistent with the need for secrecy and group solidarity the matter is if possible settled 'indoors', by the people most closely involved, and their supporters, as in the following case:

The landlord came from Emekukwu, while his tenant came from a neighbouring town, Okpala. A delegation from Emekukwu came to a relation of the tenant (the informant) to 'talk it out'. The relation referred them to the oldest man in London from Okpala as the proper person to present the Okpala case, and was invited by this elderly man to join the Okpala party. The two groups met to review the situation. They heard the evidence from the landlord and his tenant then discussed the matter in private. They reached a decision and called in the protagonists, who accepted it.

The process of alignment follows the principle of segmentary sociability.3 Protagonists expect their own kin and townspeople to support them in an orderly confrontation with the 'foreigner' and his people.

Litigation is a serious matter, with grave social consequences. However, the gravity of litigation does not always deter the person whose financial interests are at stake, if all other methods have failed to bring redress. Some people recognise the gap between the ideal and practice of going to court without deploiring it. 'Here, Ibos behave like the English to an extent but because we are expecting to go back home we try to conform to tradition. Disputes can't be settled completely by tradition,' ('we wouldn't stand for it!' his wife interjected) 'but they are reported to townspeople and discussed. If a townsman failed to pay me rent I would report him to the union in order to avoid a scandal at home. Townspeople here would have a high regard for me because I had reported the matter to them, thereby showing good intentions towards the community and a desire for peace.'

The attitude adopted in the meeting of townspeople towards disputants explains the quick reaction of the wife who 'wouldn't stand for it.' The object of the public internal hearing of the case is not only to prevent court action but to make the disputants live in peace. This requires concessions from both sides, and the acceptance of the verdict without argument. If, as happened in a dispute between landlord and tenant from Onitsha town in 1971, one party—the landlord—is dissatisfied with the verdict and plans to proceed with legal action, he is roundly condemned.

This case suggests that decisions are not always given in the interests of the financially powerful and prestigious, although the decision makers are themselves
likely to include landlords. It also suggests that men will act in conformity with the norms of the community when their financial interests would be better served by taking alternative, unconventional (but conventional in terms of the dominant culture) action. They value the esteem of fellow Ibo more than the financial rewards of court action.

**STATUS AND SECURITY**

The notion of social class, as it is used to describe the situation in British society, is not readily applicable to the Ibo in London. An egalitarian ideology obtains and few people will admit the existence of any form of stratification except that of Osu (a hereditary caste) and freeborn. But social stratification exists to the extent that there are groups with different status, between which social distance is preserved and social interaction restricted to certain areas of social life.

The components of social status include education, occupation and income, housing and life style, and degree of personal influence over other Ibo. Objective inequalities in income and housing are reflected in the subjective categories employed to describe oneself and one's acquaintances. There are two main categories: people who are said to be 'doing well' and people who are 'struggling' or unsuccessful. The person who is doing well has qualified or is likely to do so, has a remunerative job or is making money through successful business ventures, and has property. The absence of some or all of these achievements earns the description 'struggling', a term which is modestly used among social equals to describe oneself when asked how one is getting on.

The system of social ranking is not based entirely on economic criteria. 'Middle class', a term sometimes used by Ibo to outsiders, describes people who 'have finished their courses of study and are waiting to go home, are landlords, and are happily married.' Status is conferred by educational achievement, by possession of material wealth, and by personal influence manifested in requests for advice, derived from visible success in managing one's own domestic affairs.

Ibo ideology is egalitarian, not in the sense that all enjoy equal status but that status inequalities are not institutionalised. Individual life chances are unpredictable. All are free to compete for the socially approved goals. Having achieved them, the successful must show concern for social inferiors, not from a sense of noblesse oblige, but from a genuine respect for potential equals and from the mutual recognition that the positions of relative power and influence may be reversed. Respect and forebearance should characterise their dealings with lower status people.

The unsuccessful on their part have a right to expect help in the form of advice, references, sponsorship, leadership and so on. Deference towards high status individuals, if it exists at all, is based on respect for their achievements, rather than on feelings of innate inferiority. Deferential behaviour is expected only towards those people who have rendered assistance of some kind.

Frequent participation in local affairs and the rendering of advice and help are observed among high status individuals. At the same time, however, socio-economic or class categories are evident in patterns of visiting, in the choice of friends and business associates, and in private parties. This is the case particularly with the doctors, both medical and academic, who, like P. C. Lloyd's national elite, are sometimes most intimate with former colleagues and friends a hundred miles away (Lloyd 1966).
People of different social levels appear at the same public functions—weddings, farewell parties, dances and so on—but do not mix freely. The intellectuals and other successful people maintain indeed that a certain amount of social distance between themselves and the rest is culturally prescribed; that they are expected to conduct themselves with decorum and should not mix too freely. However, they take care to observe Ibo convention as far as possible. While interacting exclusively for social and convivial purposes they play some part in local affairs, accept office in local unions, meet requests for personal help and give advice in disputes.

Thus there is no real evidence of distinct socio-economic groups whose collective interests are seen to be in direct conflict, as in the British class system. It is difficult, for instance, to identify in objective terms a class of landlords with recognisable collective interests in relation to the rest of the population. There are house owners who have neither education nor local influence. The number of people who let a single room in their family house far outnumbers the multiple owners who derive substantial profit from the letting of rooms. The instance of collusion between landlords in defence of their interests is rare. In a confrontation between two groups in dispute there are likely to be landlords and tenants in both parties. The groups are recruited on a basis of kinship and locality, which cuts across socio-economic status.

Indeed, the prosperous man engages in activities which in terms of private economic interests are irrational. Acts of assistance to poorer townspeople are comprehensible only in terms of collective interest defined by descent and locality. The high ranking professional man who repatriates a mentally sick student is motivated by long term considerations in which temporary affiliations of a class nature play little part. He acts in recognition of rights and obligations in relation to clansmen which are absent from relations with status equals.

It is recognised that accountability for the well-being and activities of Ibo in London rests ultimately with townspeople. In matters of life and death they are the first to come forward. The poor must be helped by the rich (though they themselves will turn to their banks or lodges for material assistance). Relationships with poorer townspeople must be sustained since they are the people whom the better off expect to encounter in the future (as supporters of men of influence in their home towns). Townspeople have common interests in the framework in their homeland and this largely governs the attitude of the wealthy in Britain. For the poor, reliance on their more fortunate co-ethnics is a matter of necessity. However reluctant people may be to engage in money matters with kinsmen or friends, they are often the only landlords, creditors, or guarantors available in a difficult and hostile environment. Equally, however little time a man has to give attention and help to a fellow Ibo who asks for it, if he is in a position to help he has little choice but to obey the moral imperative of ethnic ties.

**The Future: Migrants or Immigrants?**

Within the Ibo community, primary loyalty lies with kin and local community. The persistence of ethnic particularism is invariably justified by reference to tradition, to the temporary nature of their stay and their eventual reintegration into Nigerian society. The change in the Ibo way of life in London, especially since the Nigeria–Biafra war, suggests a long-term future in Britain. But incorporation on one level—the economic—does not mean total assimilation. It may simply indicate an adaptability to change, a feature noted by Ottenberg (1959). While remaining committed
to 'the Ibo way of life', they are responding to economic opportunities in the manner of Ibo settlers in various parts of West Africa.6

The Ibo definition of the situation indicates a conflict, which is generally resolved in favour of returning to Nigeria, either immediately or at some future date. The advantages in remaining in Britain are outweighed by the disadvantages. Men are attracted by jobs in Britain, women by work and social security in the absence of a husband. The children's education is an important consideration. Freedom from pressing demands from kin is another factor which may influence the choice between going home and remaining in Britain. Against these advantages are the problems of discrimination in residential, occupational and recreational spheres which mitigate against identification with the wider society and the adoption of its values. Inability to achieve recognition and influence in terms of the dominant ethos of the host society, together with the emotional poverty of life they experience in a western industrial metropolis, enhances the attraction of returning to Nigeria. The idea of the homeland, of reunion with families, of attaining social status and acceptance on their own terms, reinforces in most Ibo the intention to return. There are also the pressure and expectations of kin to contend with. An important factor in the situation is the obligation to restore the declining fortunes of families who financed the trip abroad and issued instructions to 'go and return.' It explains the increasing rate of return among those who are in a position to go since they have achieved the goal for which they came.

If the rate of return is rapid for the elite, the non-elite are faced with special problems which may well prolong their stay in Britain. Perpetual students are in a dilemma which increases with the passage of time. The atmosphere of permanence is strongest in the section of the community whose objective circumstances closely resemble those of the indigenous lower middle or working classes. It includes families with school-age children whose fathers, approaching middle age, are engaged full-time in semi-skilled manual or routine white collar employment, after many years in Britain. Studies have either been abandoned or resumed on a part-time basis which offers little hope of rapid completion and a speedy return to Nigeria. While the elite qualify and return at an increasing rate the non-elite are caught in a vicious circle of failure which makes the return home an often unattainable dream.

NOTES

1 This article is based on research undertaken between 1970 and 1973. The special conditions of the research, undertaken shortly after the Nigeria-Biafra war, created problems of data collection, problems exacerbated by the absence of reliable documentary evidence or previous research. The population statistics in the article are drawn from a number of official registers, none of them completely reliable or up-to-date, the records of more than thirty local unions (voluntary associations based on community of origin in Iboland) and a Census of over 800 people conducted in the field.

Information was gathered largely by means of semi-structured interviews and participant observation. In the absence of a suitable sampling frame, and given conditions which in any case ruled out a survey method, informants were contacted on a network basis, through friends, clients, patrons, officials of formal organisations and so on. To reduce bias the information was checked carefully in a number of ways, against the evidence of reliable informants and the records of British organisations (like the Commonwealth Students' Children's Society) concerned with a wide range of Ibo families.

The period of research was preceded by several years of close and continuous involvement in the Ibo community.

2 Under the Act workers came in three categories. Students needed entry certificates; dependents could enter unrestricted.

3 The number of unskilled workers may be underrepresented in the study. Some difficulty was encountered in gaining information about jobs. Ibo are unwilling to discuss the topic of work with each other as much as with outsiders. In the competitive spirit of the Ibo problems encountered in the job market are not advertised. Data were
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collected on a number of individuals in this category from a charitable organisation helping children of overseas students.

4 In the segmentary society of the Ibo the descent group is the basic unit and kinship is the structuring principle. People from the same village or home town are regarded as brothers and sisters and treated accordingly. In the context of an ethnic minority all Ibo are defined as kin in relation to non-Ibo. See Green [1947] 1964; Uchendu 1965 and Jones 1949 for accounts of social organisation in Ibo peasant society.


6 The social organisation of Ibo expatriate communities has been described by Okonjo (1967), Wolpe (1967), Modu (1971) and Morrill (1963).

REFERENCES


Résumé

INSTALLATION TEMPORAIRE OU DÉFINITIVE? LES IBO À LONDRES

Les Ibo représentent à Londres une minorité ethnique. Leur participation sur le plan professionnel au sein de la société anglaise et les investissements fonciers qu’ils réalisent, semblent indiquer qu’ils tendent à s’y établir d’une manière permanente. On remarque toutefois un attachement très net aux normes de la société Ibo: ceci se manifeste à travers la forme et le règlement des litiges qui opposent locataires et propriétaires. En dépit d’un certain relâchement des normes culturelles, ce sont les liens de parenté et la provenance plutôt que les critères socio-économiques qui constituent les principes d’action et d’identification. Les intérêts financiers de l’individu seraient peut-être mieux desservis s’ils déviayaient des normes du groupe, mais la sécurité de l’individu demeure en fin de compte liée à son appartenance au groupe. Le respect des traditions reflète pour les Ibo le caractère temporaire de leur séjour en Grande-Bretagne. Toutefois la perspective d’un retour au Nigéria est plus immédiate pour certains d’entre eux que pour d’autres.