

**MIGRATION AND CULTURAL IDENTITY: A CASE STUDY OF ISOKO-URHOBO
COMMUNITIES IN IKALELAND SINCE THE 19TH CENTURY**

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Abstract

Migration has profoundly shaped African cultural identity and social dynamics, carrying significant implications for technology, culture, and social change. This study investigates the migration patterns of the Isoko-Urhobo communities into Ikaleland since the 19th century, exploring how these movements have influenced cultural identity and social integration. The study highlights how Isoko-Urhobo migrants have adapted to their new environment while preserving key aspects of their cultural identity. It examines the socio-cultural exchanges between the migrants and the indigenous Ikale people, focusing on marriage, language, and religious practices. Additionally, the research assesses the impact of these interactions on local governance structures and economic activities, especially in agriculture and trade. To achieve these aims, the paper utilises both primary and secondary data sources and employs a descriptive analysis approach. Through an analysis of historical accounts, oral traditions, and archival materials, the research offers insights into how migration has transformed cultural practices, identity negotiation, and intergroup relations in the region. The research underscores the significance of migration in fostering cultural resilience and social transformation in Africa. The study concludes that understanding historical migration dynamics is crucial for addressing contemporary issues of cultural diversity and integration. The findings contribute to ongoing discussions surrounding Africa's societal development in the context of technological and social change.

Keywords: Migration, Cultural Identity, Isoko-Urhobo, Ikaleland, Technology, Social Change.

Introduction

Migration has historically played a crucial role in shaping societies, influencing socio-economic structures, cultural identities, and intergroup relations. Across Africa, migration has contributed to technological advancements, economic transformations, and social integration, making it a central theme in historical and contemporary discourse (Adesote & Osiyale, 2023). In Nigeria, migration

patterns have been shaped by socio-political and economic forces, leading to the formation of multi-ethnic communities with complex cultural dynamics. The Isoko-Urhobo migration into Ikaleland provides a compelling case study of how migration fosters cultural adaptation, identity negotiation, and social integration within a host environment.

The history of migration in Nigeria can be categorised into three main periods: pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial (Adesote, 2016). Each of these periods witnessed shifts in migration trends influenced by economic opportunities, political changes, and colonial policies. During the colonial era (1900-1960), in southwestern Nigeria, urban centres such as Ibadan, Lagos, and Ondo attracted migrants due to their administrative and economic prospects (Osoba, 1979). Similarly, the movement of Isoko-Urhobo migrants into Ikaleland was largely driven by agricultural expansion, trade, and employment in the growing palm oil industry (Ogen, 2003).

The integration of Isoko-Urhobo migrants into Ikaleland led to socio-cultural exchanges that reshaped both migrant and host community identities. These interactions influenced language, marriage practices, religious beliefs, and economic activities. As Adesote and Osiyale (2023) argue, migration is not just a physical movement but also a transfer of cultural traditions, resulting in hybrid identities within host communities.

Cultural identity, as noted by Hall (1996), is not static; rather, it evolves through interactions and external influences. Migration, as a complex phenomenon, reshapes cultural practices by enabling the diffusion of traditions, languages, and religious practices, while simultaneously fostering hybrid identities. For African communities, this evolution is especially pronounced, as migrations—whether voluntary or forced—are often intertwined with economic pursuits, environmental factors, and historical events (Falola & Heaton, 2008). Consequently, migration studies provide a lens through which the cultural transformations of Africa's diverse communities can be better understood.

In southwestern Nigeria, the historical migration of various ethnic groups has created a tapestry of cultural interactions and economic collaborations. Ikaleland, situated in present-day Ondo State, exemplifies this interplay. The region's fertile lands, abundant natural resources, and strategic location have historically attracted migrants, making it a focal point for examining migration's impact on cultural and economic transformation. Historically, communities migrating into Ikaleland brought with them distinct cultural practices that were both preserved and adapted through interactions with the indigenous population. These exchanges have contributed to the cultural diversity and socio-economic development of the region.

This paper focuses on the intersection of migration and cultural identity in Ikaleland, using the migration of the Isoko-Urhobo communities as a case study. Migration is explored not merely as the movement of people but as a vehicle for cultural negotiation and socio-economic transformation. Specifically, this study seeks to analyse the cultural exchanges and economic

contributions of migrant communities to their host societies, with an emphasis on agricultural practices, religious adaptations, and intergroup relations (Omole, 2024).

A Brief Overview of Ikaleland

Ikaleland comprises fourteen Yoruba-speaking communities distinguished by their unique dialect and cultural practices. The region shares boundaries with the Ilaje, Ijo Apoi, and Ijo Arogbo to the south, Odigbo Local Government to the north, Edo State to the east, and Ogun State to the west (Adeoye, 1979). Notable communities include Ikoya, Ode-Irele, Omin, Igbodigo, Ayeka, Idepe (Okitipupa), Ode-Aye, Erinje, and Osoro. Settlements such as Akotogbo, Ajagba, Iyansan, and Iju-Osun were historically part of the Benin Confederation, bearing Edo linguistic and cultural influences (Eben Sheba, 2007).

Within Ikaleland, Osoro represents a significant area encompassing towns such as Igbotako, Ilutitun, Iju-Odo, Iju-Oke, Erekite, and Omotoso. Additionally, Ikale communities are found in Ogun State, in areas like Ayede, Ayila, Arafen, and Mobolorunduro, reflecting a broader migration and settlement pattern (Sheba, 2007).

Ikaleland, located in the southwestern part of Ondo State, Nigeria, comprises several communities renowned for their agricultural vitality and socio-economic activities. Communities such as Ode-Aye, Ilutitun, Igbotako, Erinje, Ayeka, and Okitipupa have served as focal points for palm oil production, while smaller villages like Ayasan played critical roles in the region's agricultural economy. In neighbouring Irele Local Government Area, settlements like Ajagba, Ujosun, Iyansan, Akotogbo, and Urele also became notable for their socio-economic significance, fostering interactions between the indigenous Ikale population and Isoko-Urhobo migrants (Ogen, 2003).

The migration of Isoko-Urhobo communities into Ikaleland since the 19th century introduced significant socio-economic and cultural exchanges. These migrants, primarily agrarian in their practices, contributed advanced agricultural techniques, particularly in palm oil production, a key economic activity in the region. The integration of indigenous Isoko-Urhobo farming methods with existing Ikale traditions, such as the introduction of the "Oko" system (Trough) for palm oil extraction, greatly enhanced agricultural productivity and trade in the area (Okpevra, 2014).

The economic importance of palm oil in Ikaleland was amplified during the 19th century, driven by European industrial demands. The Industrial Revolution in Britain spurred a growing need for palm oil as a lubricant and a raw material for various industries. Consequently, Ikaleland and its neighbours in the Niger Delta became integral suppliers of this essential commodity.

Historical Foundation and Geographical Context of the Isoko-Urhobo People

The historical evolution and geographic location of the Isoko-Urhobo people have significantly influenced their political and socio-economic structures. These two closely related ethnic groups

occupy an area north of the western edge of the Niger River Delta, where the evergreen forest belt transitions into the alluvial plains of the Delta. Scholars such as Aghalino (2009), Ikime (1977), Hubbard (1952), and Foss Wilson (1970) highlight that the Isoko-Urhobo territory lies approximately between longitudes 5°30' and 6°25' East and latitudes 6°0' and 5°15' North in what is now Delta State, Nigeria.

The geographical boundaries of this subregion include the former Warri Division to the west, the River Ethiope to the north, the Western Ijo to the south, and the Aboh Division to the east. Surrounding ethnic groups include the Bini to the north, the Itsekiri to the west, the Western Ijo to the south, and the Aboh people to the east (Aghalino, 2009).

The geographical contiguity of the Isoko-Urhobo territory created both challenges and opportunities. Hemmed in by their neighbours, the Isoko and Urhobo had limited access to the Niger River and coastal areas, which were the epicentres of European commercial activities during the 18th and 19th centuries. According to Ikime (1977), only a few settlements, such as Ase and Ivrogbo, had direct access to the Niger River, but these communities were small and played a marginal role during the height of European activities in the region.

Before the advent of the British colonial administration and the development of motorable roads, rivers served as the primary means of transportation both within the Isoko-Urhobo territory and in their interactions with neighbouring areas. Aghalino (2009) notes that the region's physical geography, characterised by limited arable land, constrained the possibilities for large-scale agricultural practices, which further influenced the socio-economic activities of the people.

Pre-Colonial Economic Activities of the Isoko-Urhobo People

The Isoko-Urhobo people, like many other pre-colonial Nigerian communities, developed an economy that was deeply connected to the land and its natural resources. The geographical landscape of Isoko-Urhobo land, characterised by flat terrain and annual flooding, played a significant role in shaping economic activities. The region had two major swampy areas running northeast to southwest, with a relatively higher landmass in between (Hubbard, 1948). These environmental conditions influenced the intensity of agricultural activities in different parts of the land.

In riverine communities such as Uzere and Araya, as well as certain areas of Warri, farming was less intensive compared to drier areas like Owhelogbo and Ozoro. Regardless of location, the Isoko-Urhobo people faced the challenge of adapting to fluctuating climatic conditions. The land was collectively owned due to strong kinship and communal ties, and until recently, its outright sale was forbidden, although it could be mortgaged temporarily (Aghalino, 2006).

Agriculture was the backbone of the Isoko-Urhobo economy, with yams being the most important crop. The people cultivated different varieties, including Okpe (yellow yam: *Dioscorea*

cayenensis) and Oleya (water yam: *Dioscorea alata*). Other crops such as Iziwo (pepper) and Eza (beans) were also widely grown (Aghalino, 1994:52). The palm oil industry was particularly significant, as wild groves of oil palm trees provided a major source of income. Palm oil and palm kernel were used for cooking, soap making, and the production of pomade (Aghalino, 2000:51-61). Another important tree was the raffia palm, which was tapped for palm wine.

The same raffia palm also provided the raw material for making the native alcoholic drink, Udi-Ogogoro, a strong liquor similar to European whisky. Although the exact origins of distillation technology among the Isoko-Urhobo remain unclear, the people displayed an impressive knowledge of the process.

Fishing was another essential aspect of the economy, particularly in riverine communities where agriculture was less dominant. The Isoko-Urhobo people used nets, baskets, and traps such as Uge, which were woven by both men and women. Fishing was not only a source of food but also a trade commodity that contributed to the local economy.

Trade was an essential component of the Isoko-Urhobo economy. Domestic trade flourished through local markets where people exchanged goods such as palm produce (oil and kernel), starch, yams, plantains, garri, meat, fish, woven bags, and pepper. Almost every village or clan had a market, though the sizes varied.

Historical Context of Isoko-Urhobo Migration

According to Onigu Otite, "Although there is a plethora of works on migratory processes and migrant organisations, few of these deal with the contribution of rural-to-rural migrants to socio-economic development and the emergence of small urban centres, Otite, 1979).

Cultivation of oil palm plantations; It was therefore necessary for men as well as women to increase the production of palm oil and kernels during the period to meet internal consumption in Isoko and neighbouring communities, and to meet the industrial demand in Europe (Ikime, 1972:88-89). This eagerness to produce much of the product led some persons in Isoko to travel to neighbouring communities, such as "Ukane," as they possess the skills and expertise to produce the products in line with their expected target. Indeed, prospecting the oil palm is the chief occupation of the Isoko, apart from yam and Cassava farming, and some fishing on the sidelines for those in the riverine area.

The Isoko emigrated to those areas as "Ukame" people. "Ukane" is an Isoko word meaning "to leave one's home and go and earn money in a foreign country," where it is always understood that the money will be earned by gathering palm produce and selling it. Whenever the Isoko wish to go to "Ukane", a party will be formed and visit the landowners. It was, therefore, necessary for men as well as women to increase the production of palm oil and kernels during the period to meet

internal consumption in Isoko and neighbouring communities and to meet the industrial demand in Europe (Ikime, 1972:88-89).

The Isoko-Urhobo migrants settled in various towns and villages, including Ode-Aye, Igbotako, Erinje, Ilutitun, Ayeka, Okitipupa, and other areas in Okitipupa and Irele Local Government Areas. Their migration laid the foundation for economic collaboration and cultural exchanges with the indigenous Ikale people. The migration process itself is referred to by the Isoko-Urhobo people as "Ukane", which is a corrupt form of the word "Ikale" and Urhie (meaning river in Isoko-Urhobo). The term "Urhie" refers to the river route, as the people passed through rivers on their journey. The phrase "Mi-kpu-urhie" or Otiti (1979)"Mi-kpu-ukane" is used to indicate a journey to Ikaleland, meaning "I am going to the river" or "I am going to Ikaleland."

Involvement of Isoko/Urhobo in Agricultural and Economic Innovations

Palm oil production was central to the Isoko-Urhobo economy, and they introduced advanced agricultural techniques to Ikaleland. The migrants brought with them valuable knowledge, including techniques for efficient palm oil extraction and innovations called "Oko" in the Isoko-Urhobo language (Trough). These troughs improved processing efficiency, reduced labour and time, and greatly enhanced the productivity of palm oil production in Ikaleland.

The Isoko-Urhobo migrants were also deeply involved in cassava and palm oil cultivation. Isoko-Urhobo women frequently purchased cassava farms from Ikale women, while the Isoko-Urhobo advanced oil palm production, which has since become a cornerstone of Ikaleland's economy. Women utilised a tool called "Ughoko" for cracking palm kernels before the advent of modern machines like the mechanical cracker. Okpewho (2016), The Isoko-Urhobo engaged in both economic and subsistence farming, cultivating groundnuts, setting traps for animals, and practising other forms of agriculture. (Personal Interview with Enamiroro).

Settlement Patterns: Villages, Political Structures, and Trade Networks

The Isoko-Urhobo migrants established settlements across Ikaleland, forming cohesive communities in towns such as Ode-Aye, and these villages or camps were called Isoko-Urhobo, Oko-Urhobo, and Oko-Isoko. (Interview with Chief Ifelodun).

Politically, the Isoko-Urhobo communities maintained their traditional governance structures, adapting them to their new environment. The Oldest man was made head of the village in a particular clan, especially those under the same landlords, Okpako Ewho, or Okpako Awa. At the central or the township, they have the UPU, which combines Isoko-Urhobo in the Ikaleland. There is also a women's group referred to as 'Ewheya'. Although the Urhobo Progressive Union (UPU) is primarily focused on the Urhobo people in Delta, the Isoko-Urhobo communities in Ikaleland also utilised it to maintain their cultural identity and political representation (Ikime, 1972:88-89).

Cultural Exchanges and Religious Interactions

The migration of the Isoko-Urhobo people into Ikaleland was not just a movement of people but a profound cultural and religious exchange that shaped the identities of both communities. Over time, their interactions fostered deep social integration, as families, traditions, and beliefs intertwined, creating a shared way of life that still exists today.

Religious beliefs were another area where both groups found common ground. The Isoko-Urhobo cosmology, centred on Oghene (the Supreme God), Edjo (spirits), Igbe, Mama-Iwota, and Eriwin (ancestral spirits), bore striking similarities to the Ikale belief in Olodumare, Orunmila, Ayelala, Lerun, and other deities. (Personal communication with George Enamiroro, at Ilutitun, October 6, 2024) This common spiritual foundation made it easier for them to merge certain practices. Chief Ojapewa of Ilutitun recalled that Isoko-Urhobo settlers not only worshipped Ikale deities but also introduced their spiritual customs, which the Ikale people readily embraced (Personal communication with Chief Ojapewa, October 16, 2024).

Clothing styles evolved as well. Isoko-Urhobo men adopted the Uro and Buba, which were common among the Ikale, while some Ikale men and women incorporated Isoko-Urhobo fabric patterns and jewellery styles into their attire. Madam Omonigho Igben, an Isoko woman married to an Ikale man, proudly stated, "We no longer see ourselves as different people. We eat the same food, speak each other's languages, and our children embrace both traditions" (Personal communication with Madam Omonigho Igben, December 12, 2024).

Marriage was, perhaps, the strongest bond between the two groups. These unions not only merged families but also cemented cultural and religious traditions. Isoko-Urhobo parents named their children after Ikale customs, with Isoko-Urhobo families using "Taye" and "Kehinde" for twins instead of the Urhobo equivalent, "Ejime" or "Ijime" (personal communication with Madam Queen Samuel, at Ilutitun, 2024).

Christianity also played a role in uniting both communities. Many Isoko-Urhobo migrants in Ikaleland joined Ikale-led churches, while some Ikale people converted to Isoko-Urhobo-founded Pentecostal Churches, such as God's Pentecostal Church in Ode-Aye, established by an Isoko pastor. The Catholic Church, in particular, became a meeting point for both communities. Chief Omotayo Ajayi observed that many Ikale in Ilutitun learned to speak Irhobo, Usobo (Isoko-Urhobo dialect) simply because the church congregation was predominantly Isoko-Urhobo (Personal communication with Omotayo Ajayi at Ilutitun, 2024).

Impact of the Isoko/Urhobo Migration on Ikaleland

The migration of the Isoko-Urhobo people into Ikaleland has left an indelible mark on the region's economic, cultural, and social landscape. Their advanced techniques in palm oil production have been particularly influential, establishing oil palm cultivation as a cornerstone of Ikaleland's

economy. Additionally, Economic conditions in Europe in the nineteenth century were favourable to the reappearance of the produce of the oil palm in international trade and the development of other vegetable oils. (Personal communication with Enamiroro)

Chief Enamiroro (personal communication, October 6, 2024) highlighted the harmonious relationship between the Ikale and Isoko-Urhobo, noting that Ikale landlords were eager to integrate Isoko-Urhobo tenants into their farmlands. Beyond the annual tenant payments, often made in tins of palm oil, Isoko-Urhobo settlers were granted the freedom to cultivate crops such as yam, cocoyam, and groundnuts, as well as to engage in fishing, hunting, and communal agricultural endeavours. This collaboration extended to financial cooperatives, with both groups contributing to annual funds in an event known locally as "Ipade Usobo." (Communication with Enamiroro)

Culinary traditions also experienced a rich exchange due to this migration. The Ikale adopted Isoko-Urhobo dishes like Owho and combinations such as Iribo Oto and Iziwo Oto, collectively referred to as "Obe Gari" (Gari soup). Similarly, Amiedi (Baga soup), another Isoko-Urhobo delicacy, became known among the Ikale as "Obe Egbo." Conversely, the Isoko-Urhobo embraced Pupuru, a fermented cassava meal from Ikaleland, which they termed "Iprupru" or "Ipupuru" (Communication with Samuel, 2024).

The exchange of clothing styles further exemplifies the cultural integration between the two groups. Richer and Sumber (1995) discuss how migration influences clothing by blending traditional attire with new cultural elements. In this context, Isoko-Urhobo men adopted the Uro and Buba attire from the Ikale, while some Ikale individuals incorporated Isoko-Urhobo fashion elements into their styles (interview with Aregbesola, 2024).

Intermarriage played a pivotal role in deepening cultural ties. Kalmijn (1998) posits that intermarriage facilitates cultural assimilation by promoting shared values, language acquisition, and social acceptance within host communities. The influence of the Isoko-Urhobo migration is also evident in the nomenclature of certain locales within Ikaleland, such as Ago Jacob and Ago Okatugba ("Ago" meaning "village" in the local dialect). Aregbesola emphasised the significant role of Isoko-Urhobo settlers in shaping the identity of Ikaleland (personal communication with Aregbesola, 2024).

Economically, the legacy of the Isoko-Urhobo is prominently displayed in Ikale's palm oil industry. Many Ikale individuals have become adept at harvesting tall palm trees and actively engage in the palm oil market, a sector initially influenced by Isoko-Urhobo proficiency. Today, Ikale traders and farmers are leaders in palm oil production, underscoring the enduring economic impact of this migration (communication with Aregbesola, 2024).

Before the arrival of the Isoko-Urhobo, the primary economic activities of the Ikale people centred on subsistence farming, including the cultivation of yam, cocoyam, and kola nut as major cash crops, with cocoa being adopted later from neighbouring Yoruba communities. The Ikale were not skilled in Gari processing activities; their processing efforts were mainly focused on Pupuru, which they supplied to the Ilaje, their riverine neighbours. Today, oil palm production has become the predominant economic activity in Ikaleland, highlighted by the establishment of the Okitipupa Oil Palm Company in the late 1960s. Chief Ifelodun and Urhobo introduced the modern technique of oil palm processing in the 1980s to Osooro in Okitipupa Local government, known as the "digester" (Personal communication with Tuned Aregbesola at Igbotako, 2024), supplementing the traditional trough system previously used (Adepoju, 2005).

The intertwined history of economic, cultural, and social interactions between the Isoko-Urhobo and Ikale peoples illustrates the transformative power of migration. Present-day Ikaleland stands as a testament to the enduring influence of the Isoko-Urhobo migration, serving as a model of cultural integration and economic resilience (Adepoju, 2005).

In a broader West African context, migration has historically played a crucial role in shaping societies. Adepoju (2005) identifies dominant migration patterns in the region, including permanent, seasonal, cross-border, and transit migration. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has recognised the importance of such mobility, adopting the Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, Right of Residence, and Establishment in 1979 to promote regional integration. The Isoko-Urhobo migration into Ikaleland exemplifies these broader regional trends, highlighting how the movement of peoples within West Africa contributes to the dynamic and diverse cultural landscapes observed today. (Adepoju, 2005).

Conclusions

The migration of the Isoko-Urhobo people to Ikaleland represents a significant chapter in the history of cultural exchange and economic development in southwestern Nigeria. Their agricultural innovations, particularly in palm oil production, were crucial in shaping the region's economy and enhancing trade networks. The cultural and religious fusion between the Isoko-Urhobo and the Ikale people created a vibrant, hybrid identity that continues to influence the region's social fabric. The Isoko-Urhobo communities, through the establishment of the Urhobo Progressive Union (UPU) in Ikaleland, demonstrated the importance of unity in preserving cultural heritage while integrating into new environments.

Recommendations

1. Cultural Preservation and Promotion: There should be a concerted effort to preserve and promote the cultural heritage of the Isoko-Urhobo and Ikale people. This can be achieved through the

documentation of traditional practices, festivals, and languages, and promoting their inclusion in local and national cultural events.

2. Economic Collaboration: The historical collaboration between the Isoko-Urhobo and Ikale peoples should be strengthened to foster mutual economic growth, especially in agriculture and trade. This can include joint ventures in palm oil production, agricultural research, and regional trade agreements.

3. Educational and Social Integration: Institutions should be established to promote the educational and social integration of Isoko-Urhobo and Ikale descendants, focusing on fostering social cohesion, collaboration, and cross-cultural understanding.

4. Research and Preservation of Migration Stories: More research should be undertaken to explore the history of the Isoko-Urhobo migration to Ikaleland, preserving the stories and experiences of the migrants for future generations.

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**JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES AND LEADERSHIP STUDIES: JOURNAL OF
FACULTY OF ARTS, DENNIS OSADEBAY UNIVERSITY, ASABA, DELTA STATE
Volume 1, Number 1, August, 2025, ISSN: 2971-5741**

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Volume 1, Number 1, August, 2025, ISSN: 2971-5741**

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