

Transmigration: Encountering “Others” in Today’s Pluralistic Nations

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Abstract

Transmigrations are especially common in today’s large, populous nations. Review of six recent cases from four continents reveals four things. First, the three main types of transmigration recognized since the mid-twentieth century turn out to be poorly conceived. Secondly, transmigration planning only rarely proves adequate. Third, transmigrants’ encounters with people they view as “others” tend to be difficult for one or both parties. Finally, these difficulties generally remain beyond the purview of international agencies.

Introduction

For many, the term “migration” calls to mind those great movements of people that have occurred between nations. One thinks of examples such as some nine million Africans being shipped as slaves to the Americas between the 17th and 19th centuries (Wolf, E. R., 1982, pp. 195-196); one to two million indentured laborers from India (plus others from China, Italy, etc.) replacing these slaves during the 19th century (Tinker, H., 1974, pp. 114-115); fifty million people flooding out of Europe between 1800 and 1914, pushed from there by commercialized agriculture, mechanized production, or intolerable rents and mortgages (Wolf, E. R., 1982, p. 363-4); a counter-flow of people from former African and Asian colonies of Britain, France, etc. converging on mother countries after their empires broke up; and massive recent migrations of Mexicans, Turks, Indonesians, and so on, to particular industrialized nations. Significant as these international migrations may be, we must not lose sight of comparable movements of people that have taken place *within* nations. Those are what I wish to examine here.

Because internal migrations are most likely in large nations, ones that possess both natural diversity and culturally heterogeneous populations, let me open with two background observations about large nations *per se*. First, they owe their origin to more than one process. When Europe’s empires broke up in the twentieth century, some chunks won independence in the form of enormous, culturally complex mega-states. A prime example: The newly born nation

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of India approximated Europe in its size, population, and linguistic complexity. Nigeria, home to four major ethnic groups and some 450 others at independence, was less than seven years old when its southeastern quadrant, Biafra, attempted secession. At the time when the Dutch cast it loose, Indonesia consisted of 17,508 islands, diverse in both culture and resources. And Pakistan in 1947 was so internally incompatible culturally that rivalry split it in two only 14 years later, after bitter fighting. Other mega-states [China, Russia, USA] grew slowly in size and complexity over centuries by intermittently extending their control over neighboring areas.

But, a more pertinent observation about size and complexity deserves pondering. Because the world's 10 most populous nations today (China, India, USA, Indonesia, Brazil, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Russia, Nigeria, and Japan) are all culturally pluralistic, and because they were home to about 60% of humanity by 2006, it is accurate to say that life in culturally heterogeneous society has now become the normal human experience. And this inventory ignores famous yet less populous pluralistic nations, including Canada, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, Argentina, Switzerland, South Africa, Kenya, Malaysia, and Fiji. To phrase this matter another way, for most contemporary humans, their fellow citizens include people they are likely to consider as being "others." This can even be said of Japan, which Japanese and outsiders often speak of mistakenly as being homogeneous — brushing aside in the process the Ainu, Koreans (some of whom have participated in Japanese society for many centuries), and some six thousand communities of Burakumin.

This growing cultural heterogeneity of nations bears directly on our topic. Sometimes, programs have been set up to move large numbers of people from one region to another within a nation. The goal may be to rectify a local shortage of laborers (as in early 20th century Dutch movement of Javanese to Sumatra). It may be to exploit known or presumed natural resources

(as when Brazil encouraged farmers and corporations to “colonize” tropical rainforest). It may be to alleviate region-specific land pressure (as in Java or Bangladesh). Or it may be to integrate a mega-state and reinforce its national boundary in a sparsely inhabited outlying province (as in China or Indonesia) (Tirtosudarmo, R., 2001, p. 217; Budiardjo, C., 1986, pp. 111-116).

The concept of transmigration

In Indonesia, moving people thus came to be known in 1947 as “transmigration” (Hardjono, J. M., 1977, p. 22). This happens to be an old term in English, possessing suitably transitive meanings — for such population movement is commonly initiated by the state. Note that transmigration, almost invariably, has thrown together people who see each other as culturally and linguistically unlike. Javanese when moved from their crowded island into Sumatra, Kalimantan, Sulawesi, or Irian Jaya were strangers to the locals in their speech and habits. So were Bangladeshi lowlanders in the Chittagong Hills, or Han Chinese in Xinjiang-Uygur Autonomous Region, or in Tibet. In each of these instances, indigenous peoples had reason to feel that “others” were being forced upon them. How different is this from the relationships we see between international migrants and their host peoples in USA, Europe, Malaysia, etc., today? One obvious key difference has to do with who has legitimate power and control, for, in transmigrations, a government agency generally sponsors or at least supports the action. This, in turn, means that the migrants, rather than the local populace, may receive disproportionate government support. But, of course, they may also be left to their own devices.

The three main types of transmigration recognized since the mid-twentieth century are:

- general — which is government sponsored;
- spontaneous — which is voluntary, though often with government or other institutional support; and

- local — which is resettlement of people displaced by disaster, development, or establishment of nature reserves (Pérez-Sainz, J. P., 1983; Adhiati, M. A. S. and Bobsien, A., 2001).

Examples of each type are in order. But six cases will show us immediately that this established classification is too simple to accommodate the complexities of actual cases, because all six examples combine the distinctive features of two or more of the three types. We will return to this problem later.

Six cases

The cases to be examined include one especially well-known example each from North America, South America, Africa, and Asia, plus two more informative cases from Asia — one of them from my own experience.

Case 1: Indonesia's famous general transmigrations began under the Dutch in 1905 (Hardjono, J. M., 1977, p. 16). They continued in independent Indonesia and, during just six recent Five Year Plans (from 1969 to 1997), the government moved 1,164,902 families (some five million people) from the crowded inner islands to more sparsely populated outer islands, with about three million spontaneous transmigrants following suit (Tirtosudarmo, R., 2001, pp. 211). Sponsored families of cultivators were screened for suitability, but the same cannot be said for their destinations. The settlers frequently found themselves dealing with infertile soil, swamps or peat bogs, and difficult new agricultural pests (Otten, M., 1986, pp. 72-74; Pérez-Sainz, J. P. 1983, pp. 204-205). These impediments to farming led many settlers to veer off to town life, to try other occupations in the new land (such as factory work, scavenging, prostitution), or even to set out on the path home (Hardjono, J. M., 1977, p. 37; Otten, M., 1986, pp. 72-74; Rich, B., 1994, p. 37). An unpublished French survey found that 80% of the

transmigration sites did not improve people's living standards (Rich, B., 1994, p. 37). There were also unwelcoming neighbors whose prior claims to the land had been ignored (Pérez-Sainz, J. P. 1983, p. 205; Colchester, M. 1986b, pp. 100-107). Violent resistance of displaced indigenous peoples followed in one region after another (Colchester, M. 1986b, p. 109; Le Prestre, P. 1989, p. 176). This became a sufficient national security issue that, when Indonesia established a Department of Transmigration in 1983, an army major general was appointed as Secretary General of the Department (Tirtosudarmo, R. 2001, pp. 200, 217). In sum, implementation of the program had been so badly bungled that government sponsorship probably meant little to either the new settlers or those expected to accommodate them.

Case 2: Brazil's so-called "colonization" projects in Amazonia began in 1912 and grew in the early 1950s. But it was only after a 1964 military coup that we encounter a general transmigration scheme or a massive, spontaneous response. The 1960s plan was complex. It was designed to relieve population pressure, "unlock resources," make the tropical forest productive, and rectify a low population density near the nation's borders (Smith, N. 1981, pp. 755-756; Lutzenberger, J. A. 1987, p. 155; Rattner, H. 1988). Cultivators, ranchers, planters, and miners were sought. And individual and corporate participants flowed in on their own due to a complex planned infrastructure of highways and cross cutting "penetration roads", plus loans and tax incentives (Smith, N. 1981, pp. 755; Lutzenberger, J. A. 1987, p. 157; Sponsel, L. E. 1992, p. 243; Dargavel, J. and Kengen, S. 1992, p. 225). What this plan lacked, however, was information about either the soils or the preparation of settlers. It is widely known that individuals, especially, burned or clear-cut the forest and left fragile tropical soils open to leaching within several years (Lutzenberger, J. A. 1987, pp. 158-159). It is less well appreciated that *most* soils were poor, that erosion was caused, that inappropriate crops were planted because banks played a part in their

selection, that markets were overly distant, that needed herbicides were lacking, that humans brought in malaria and plant diseases, and that “farmers” were not screened for their agricultural knowledge (Smith, N. 1981, pp. 757-760). By comparison, Indonesian transmigration was relatively successful! Indigenes such as the Northern Kayapó fared moderately well. Some were protected from encroachment by living in Xingu Indigenous Park, although that did not prevent the military from building a highway that bisected the Park. Development roads in general reached Kayapó in the late 1960s, bringing “disease, prostitution, malnutrition, environmental degradation, crime,” and so on. While these meant many deaths, the Kayapó population had recovered by 1990 (Rabben, L. 1998, pp. 13, 45). Indeed, by the 1970s, they were patrolling their borders, attacking invaders, and getting press coverage that allowed them to prevent Brazil’s military from dumping nuclear waste near their territory (Rabben, L. 1998, pp. 16-17).

Case 3: Spontaneous transmigrants from Bangladesh’s crowded plain have ignored restrictions and filtered into the forested, but already inhabited, Chittagong Hills ever since the 19th century. Then, in 1961, indigenous hill folk lost much of their best land to a hydroelectric project without adequate compensation (Zaman, M. Q., 1982, p. 77). Five years later, the government lifted restrictions on settlement of the region by lowlanders (Zaman, M. Q., 1982, p. 77). They flooded in. Indigenous hill tribes finally organized to protest ever-growing seizure of their lands. Not only were their pleas for government assistance ignored, a paramilitary force created by the government “wrought havoc in some tribal villages under . . . the pretext of ferreting out persons who collaborated with the Pakistan army during the war for independence in 1971” (Zaman, M. Q., 1982, p. 78). When the hill tribes reacted more radically to yet further displacement, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, they not only discovered their government arming the immigrants, they found themselves facing 14,000 troops as well. By 1984, thousands

had died and an estimated 55,000 hill peoples had been pushed forcibly out of Bangladesh into India (into India's Mizoram Territory and Tripura State) (Bertocci, P. J., 1984a, p.87; 1984b, p. 201). This is just one more instance, then, of pressure from transmigrants — who enjoyed open or tacit government support — forcing indigenous peoples to flee as refugees. Yet there can be little question that immigrants from the Bangladesh plains saw the overall outcome as satisfactory.

Case 4: “Spontaneous” may be a more appropriate term than “local” to describe the migrations that resulted from the American dust bowl of the 1930s. This is because, although much federal money was spent on various kinds of relief — \$525 million in 1934 alone, there was no general plan to resettle the multitudes whose farms and communities had been devastated (Worster, D. 1979: 39). Almost three and a half million people fled the U.S. plains as a result of the eight-year drought and dust storms. Although there were efforts to turn them away, over 300,000 migrants entered California in search of work; 460,000 more went as far as the Pacific Northwest (Worster, D. 1979: 49-50). The low pay that desperate “Okies” were willing to accept had a familiar ripple effect. Indeed, one byproduct of their search for work in California was that their asking wage undercut that of migrant Mexican farm workers, necessitating repatriation of 120,000 of the latter to Mexico (Public Broadcasting Service 2005).

Case 5: The enormous Aswan High Dam project necessitated moving about 100,000 Nubians from near the riverbanks of the Nile in southern Egypt and northern Sudan to newly created communities some distance away. And these were situated on previously unoccupied land. Because we possess baseline data on Nubians, collected by Robert Fernea's several teams prior to the 1963 to 1965 resettlement (Fernea, E. W. and Fernea R. A. 1991, p. ix), we have a better picture than usual of what local transmigration entailed for those moved. Resettlement was

also carefully planned, though not with Nubian culture in mind. For example, the Egyptian and Sudanese governments set out to provide Nubians with “better living conditions” (Fahim, H. M. 1981, p. 35). Yet, Egypt provided substantially smaller houses (with an increase from 0.7 to 1.6 people per room) and they lacked the tall walls and vent cooling systems of usual Nubian dwellings. Also, most elderly, widowed, and divorced individuals were placed in separate houses instead of with relatives. And production of a new crop was required (Fahim, H. M. 1981, pp. 60-62). At least communication, transport, markets, utilities, security, social services, education, and medical care were greatly improved (Fahim, H. M. 1981, pp. 63-65). Sudan provided about the same mix of problematic houses and much improved services (Fahim, H. M. 1981, pp. 65-67). Byproducts of these changes in Egypt were that Nubians “rejuvenated” their arts, they were strengthened as a group, they took advantage of new educational and employment opportunities, and they were able to dominate local elections (Fernea, E. W. and Fernea R. A. 1991, pp. 172, 175, 179; Fernea, R. A. and Rouchdy, A. 1991, pp. 191-192). In balance, perhaps they came out relatively well.

Case 6: A final local transmigration involves people I have studied intermittently since 1962, Paliyan hunter-gatherers in Tamil Nadu, south India. Colleagues and I paid them a brief revisit in 2000-2001, when news reached us that the state’s Forest Department had named one of their hill regions “The Giant Grizzled Squirrel Wildlife Sanctuary.” This 486 km² sanctuary extended about 51 km along the forested ranges. It was an area that had long been the home of 12 bands, five of which I knew personally. The Paliyan foothold in the hills was well attested. Their age-old rock paintings adorned local caves (Selvakumar, V., in press) and hoary local traditions of the people themselves and their neighbors placed them in that forest centuries ago (Gardner, P. M., 1982, pp. 465-466). As of January 2001, the District Forest Officer in charge of

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the sanctuary had announced no provision whatsoever for dealing with the people he was displacing. One report summed the situation up thus:

Though they had been relatively undamaging denizens of that forest since ancient times, they had been given no new habitat, no training for an alternative livelihood, and no compensation of any kind (Gardner, P. M., 2004, p. 66). Ten bands of Paliyans had not only been stripped of their traditional right to forage in the region for subsistence and trade, but they had also been told by men in khaki uniforms that, if they were found living in the deep forest, they would be shot on sight. That may not in fact be the official policy, but the threat has had the desired effect (Gardner, P. M., 2004, p. 66).

We ascertained that all deep-forest bands of the region had already edged closer to the forest margin. But they were languishing there, with no obvious safe or legal way of making a living. There was talk of creating a game reserve in the big Palani hill range to the north as well. It promised to impact a greater number of Paliyan bands, and in similar ways. Notably, there was no government support for the tribal people who were being moved. Instead of calling the Forest Department's programs "transmigrations," perhaps I should label them "evictions" as, to date, those ordered out of the forest were given no destination or plan of action. Morris uses the same term, "eviction," to characterize removal of other Indian tribes from forestland (Morris, B., 1986, p. 256). Officials in charge may have hoped that Paliyans would simply disappear quietly without any outlay of public funds — conceivably by moving to another range or assimilating into Tamil society. Such retreat was indeed possible. These hunter-gatherers, renowned for constructing one of the world's most peaceful ways of life, do traditionally prefer to deal with conflict by silent withdrawal rather than by confrontation (Gardner, P. M. 2000; Fry, D. P. 2007, pp. 28-32). Certainly friends are protesting on their behalf, but I personally anticipate no tribal challenge to the insensitive and irresponsible actions of the government.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, let me say first that the traditional classification errs in treating “general,” “spontaneous,” and “local” transmigrations as if they are distinct and separate types of phenomena. Each of the supposed distinctive features is a widely occurring aspect of transmigration. Only the migrations of Bangladesh lowlanders and those fleeing the dust bowl lacked sponsors. Only the Nubian and Paliyan moves lacked spontaneous participants. And all six cases had to do with an ecological problem of some sort, with development, or with establishment of a nature reserve. Questioning the traditional framework is long overdue.

Despite much effort, planning was of poor quality in most cases. There was none in Bangladesh or the U.S., it was inexcusably incomplete in the Paliyan case, and it proved inadequate in Indonesia and Amazonia. Those familiar with World Bank policies may not be surprised that the World Bank played a major financial role in implementing problematic transmigrations of Indonesia and Brazil (Colchester, M. 1986a, pp. 61-70; Le Prestre, P. 1989; Treese, D. 1989, pp. 65-67; Rich, B. 1994). Except for its problematic new housing, the Aswan High Dam project remains our lone good example of adequate planning.

As for encounters with “others,” transmigrants displaced locals in three instances, for the outcome in Irian Jaya (Indonesia) resembled those in Chittagong Hills and California. In all three instances (as, also, in Darfur and Tibet), migrants turned locals into refugees. The Kayapó in Amazonia experienced losses, then held firm. Had more locals stood their ground, they might have suffered the same fate as proud Acehnese in Sumatra (Indonesia), that of being dubbed “terrorists” both by their own government and by geopolitically naïve leaders elsewhere. Only Nubians, who moved into a former vacuum, and non-violent Paliyans, who used self-restraint, avoided difficult relations with the “others.” These six, non-randomly chosen cases suggest that

conflict may be hard to avoid in transmigrations.

Our planet has long been crisscrossed with ever-new streams of migrants, whether international or internal to nations. Clearly both kinds of systemic adjustment are here to stay. And clearly they are complex. If one thing best distinguishes the present from the past, it may be the current diversity of the migrants — the diversity of those in motion and the diversity of their directions. But note what could be an upsurge of transmigration. Though we may wish that all migration processes could be made more humane, we must appreciate the fact that the troubling transmigrations just described take place *within* nations. As such, they remain beyond the purview of civilizing international agencies.

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