

**“CHECKING OUT”: MIGRATION, POPULAR CULTURE, AND
THE ARTICULATION AND FORMATION OF CLASS
IDENTITY.**

BY

ADESINA, OLUWAKEMI ABIODUN (MRS.)
DOCTORAL STUDENT,
DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY,
FACULTY OF ARTS,
UNIVERSITY OF IBADAN, NIGERIA
E-MAIL: oluwakemiadesina@yahoo.com
ALT. EMAIL: aanuoluwapo18@yahoo.com

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ABSTRACT

An enquiry into the causes of migrations out of Nigeria should begin by rejecting the assumption that every migrant was escaping from poverty, squalor, deprivation and want. Another widely held assumption that should be discountenanced is that the focus of such migrations out of the country is Europe, North America, and other advanced countries of the world. Such popular assumptions have neglected an important aspect of migration out of Nigeria – the social parameters that determine emigration. This work concentrates on a little-studied aspect of what engendered migration out of Nigeria. This is the gap between social need and social reality and the tension engendered between the middle-class ideology of consumption and the reality of social upward mobility. There developed a new level of interest and a lively counterculture on the heels of social needs, social acceptance and upward social mobility. This became the phenomenon of ‘Checking out’. This was euphemism for leaving the country not as a result of indigence but as a matter of or in search of prestige and, or, comfort. As a result of this, a whole new generation of youths from 1989 or thereabout, out of personal and social considerations became ‘embassy crawlers’ and “visa hunters”- these in themselves became forms of social status. Since then it is roughly estimated that two of every five University undergraduates and College students became interested not in seeking gainful employment after graduation, but in leaving Nigeria. Similarly, gainfully employed young men and women preferred to leave their jobs in search of glamour and excitement abroad. Salaries and wages became visa application fees rather than money deployed in search of material comfort.

Introduction

Conventional indices on Migration flows out of Nigeria would point to the prevalence of economic migrants whose destination was the Western part of the world. This is because sufficient literature does not exist on migration both as tool for self-fulfilment and social self satisfaction, and one that was Afrocentric. This is because the activities of this latter group has been overshadowed by interests generated by discourse on: outgoing migration from the region and the attendant loss of skilled labour to the continent; the desperate attempts by West African Migrants to enter Europe surreptitiously through the sea lanes and its attendant loss of lives; and, the considerable earnings and remittances of the diaspora of sub-Saharan Africans living overseas. It is suffice to say migration flows within Africa (just like its overseas variant) exhibits a wide range of complex patterns and strategies (See, Amin 1974). The phenomenon has been known to occur variously, as part of the desire for economic well-being (McCain 1972), a refugee from political instability and several other factors. The potential benefits of such migrations are unquantifiable both for the individuals engaged in this and their people back home. The Executive Summary of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) would affirm:

...The potential for migrants to help transform their native countries has captured the imagination of national and local authorities; international institutions and the private sector. There is an emerging consensus that countries can cooperate to create triple wins—for migrants, for their countries of origin and for the societies that receive them (UNECA).

The United Nations Regional Fact sheet on migration affirmed that in 2005, there were nearly 16 million international migrants living in sub-Saharan African countries, constituting 2.1 per cent of the total population. The most significant receiver of migrants within the sub-continent is South Africa (United Nations). A sizable proportion of these would be engaged in short-term, long-term and circular migration

flows. Some were driven by economic motivations while others were impelled by the unfulfilled expectations on the quality of life at home. This work provides insights into the existence of a migrant group stimulated by quality-of-life motivations. It also highlights the implications for popular culture and international migration.

Methodological and Theoretical Issues

There has been an abundance of studies dealing with various facets of regional and international migration in West Africa. In most of these studies, the narrative had revolved around either forced migration or economic migration. Personal decisions to achieve a better social status have rarely received attention. This work looks at the dynamics of migration out of Nigeria within the contexts of social and generational aspirations. This is based on the mindset that 'checking out' of the country confers status, stature, upward mobility and conquest. It traces the cause, scope and consequences of Nigerian emigration abroad and reflects the growing interests socially. This work contributes to the historiography of Nigerian emigration by combining historical and empirical methods. These methods are imperative because of their capacity to convey meaning and depth. The work relies on information by migrants, their families and potential migrants from different parts of Nigeria available in the public domain and, through interviews and newspaper reports. It evaluates the decisions to migrate both at the local level and within the context of the international economic, social and political systems. It also focuses on strategies individuals pursue and the cultural factors affecting these strategies. This departs from the position of Samir Amin (1972) who argued against investigating the motivations of migrants. He averred that choices which migrants make are predetermined by the system and it was for this reason that he suggested attention should be focused on the form of socio-economic organization which exists on the development being pursued

in a particular region (Sarfoh 1995). It has to be pointed out at this stage that additional data to be used in analyzing this study is still being gathered and will only be conclusive when a substantial part of the questionnaires distributed to respondents are received and analysed. Two out of Nigeria's thirty-six states (Oyo and Lagos) are being used as the study area for this aspect of the study.

Available literatures on migrations to other parts of or out of Africa are unanimous that International migration plays an important role in the continent's struggle to develop and improve welfare, peace and stability. The focus, however, has always been at the community level rather than at the level of the individual. This work affirms that despite variation in the migration factors across regions, an extremely complex combination of microeconomic and social motivations underpin decisions to migrate. But as the neo-classic or Harris-Todaro approach avows disparity in real income or expected income clearly drive the supply of migrants in a large number of cases, this work operates within the assumption that migration between two countries may slow down when there is an expectation that the aggregate quality of life has improved considerably in the lower-income country. Many people leave when they are prone to physical attacks or abuse, experience poor service delivery, exist under an uncertain business investment climate or experience poor governance at the local or national level. (<http://siterources.worldbank.org/>)

The history and dynamics of migration in Nigeria

Throughout history, Nigerians have engaged in migration across the borders of the West African sub-region. In the pre-colonial period there were intensive migratory movements dominated by long-distance trade and warfare (Toure and Fadayomi, 1992). Migration out of Nigeria also became pronounced in the days of British colonialism when opportunities for trade and settlement expanded. Much of the

migration out of Nigeria in the pre-colonial and colonial periods were organised in ways that made Nigerians beneficiaries of the social and economic opportunities within the continent. While Nigerian communities would blossom in almost every state in West Africa, sizeable Nigerian Diaspora communities would flower in Ghana, Dahomey and Ivory Coast where they became entrepreneurial and innovative. In fact, by the second quarter of the twentieth century Nigerians constituted the largest single group from Anglophone West Africa resident in Ghana and made up a sizeable proportion of all aliens in the country (Anarfi et al 2003). The Diaspora community would become more pronounced as migration out of Nigeria would follow the well known route- family and kinship ties. It is apposite, however, that the migrants that fed the Diaspora communities would do so largely as a result of trade (Eades 1994). The migration beginning in the 1980s would follow a different pattern.

It is rewarding to understand the political economy that provided the context within which migration out of Nigeria from the 1980s took place. With the collapse of the Nigerian economy in the 1980s and the subsequent adoption of the Structural Adjustment Programme in 1986, the country witnessed so sharp and quick a fall in living conditions (Mosley 1992). As the material conditions of the people became worse, Nigerians began to develop coping strategies in various facets of their lives. While some took to crime and prostitution, others chose to leave the country in search of greener pastures- mostly as a result of indigence or in search of better-paying jobs. Quite a different group would ultimately develop on the heels of these economic migrants. This was the group that was either gainfully employed or belonged to the materially comfortable class but who felt impelled to seek social satisfaction beyond the country's borders. Unlike economic migrants whose motives revolve around the need to acquire capital that could afford them higher levels of comfortable and better

living on their return to their places of origin, those who 'checked out' of the country in search of better living conditions did so because of the imbalance in economic and social opportunities. Infrastructure decay would play a significant role in the migration process of this breed in the 1980s and thereafter. The provision of adequate social services became a serious problem. Not even increased government investment in the provision of these services either directly or indirectly could ameliorate the situation. Inadequate supply of housing, water and sanitary services both in quality and quantity became a major constraint to improving the standard and quality of life of the average Nigerian citizen. Available data revealed for instance that about 65% of low and middle-income families occupy substandard apartments in high density areas of Nigerian cities. Such apartments cater for over 80% of the population in Lagos. A sizable proportion of the population live in one-room apartments and in other cities such as Kaduna, Kano, Calabar, it was not uncommon to find a family of eight sharing a single room, or a man and his two wives sharing two tiny rooms with children(Fadayomi et al.:1992:62). The social circumstances of the urban dwellers remained appalling. It is the problem of sub-standard dwelling. According to Onibokun(1986):

...our cities are like islands of poverty in seas of relative affluence as it does not require professional skill in environmental perception to note the difference between the residential, environmental, and the overall physical structure of the central parts of Lagos and Ibadan, for example, and their suburbs. The majority of urban dwellers live in unkept (sic) and often squalid hearts of the cities under conditions that are at times sub-human, sharing sub-standard houses which by any standard are slums.

The consequences of the foregoing are multifarious. These include the morbidity rates from air-borne diseases, crime, violence and other social problems. One serious effect however remained the psycho-social consequences. According to a report by *The African Guardian* (April 16, 1987):

... those subjected to crowded dwellings easily get irritable and are, therefore, prone to aggression. This explains the constant bouts within such families and between families living in such house.

The flow of oil revenue into Nigeria in the post-Civil war decade (1970-1980) would buoy the commercial sector and these would in turn lead to the emergence of a more defined class structure. The oil boom gave Nigeria the wealth to import more of consumer goods. The revenue would ultimately transform the lifestyles of some sections of the urban population by increasing their consumption of imported goods (Braimoh 1994). However, the petro-naira rather than ameliorate conditions went ahead to accentuate the disparity between the haves and the haves-not and this would reach an epidemic proportion from 1989 culminating in the severe economic crisis of the 1990s. It must be noted that the phenomenon of graduate unemployment had become an issue by 1983. The situation by 1986 had reached a crisis point. The nation then began to experience widespread unemployment of professionals, graduates, secondary and primary school leavers and of unskilled workers (Fadayomi, Titilola, Oni and Fapounda, 1992:100). The escalating wave of penury and erosion of real incomes due to spiralling inflation occasioned by the devaluation of the nation's currency, the Naira, in the 1980s and 1990s meant that a large percentage of the population underwent severe hardship. By 1999 the country had become classified by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) as one of the worst performing economies on the African continent (National Concord, 1999:11). The army of unemployed rose geometrically. The urban job market not only became oversupplied but also underpaid. Unemployed graduates littered the streets. All these induced not only an exodus from the country but also brought about a profound redefinition of what it meant to have either job or social satisfaction. This gave teeth to the well-worn Yoruba aphorism *Olowo kan ni arin otoshi mewa, otoshi ni gbogbo won* (literally, one

successful person in a family of indigents is not prosperous; he is as indigent as the others). Nigerians practice the extended family system and this act as brake on self-aggrandisement. To make matters worse, health systems, road networks, schools, sewage services, water and electricity supplies collapsed and the public transportation system became dilapidated. Thus, given the steady rise in the consciousness of a new generation of Nigerians, it became obvious that even when gainfully employed, it was no longer feasible to enjoy a high level of standard of living that would transform them into comfortable members of the middle class. A redefinition of their status therefore became imperative. This set in motion a new agenda of looking beyond Nigeria's borders to achieve a sense of well-being.

Economic crisis, changing development and citizenship paradigms

Forced and voluntary migration is induced by several factors. Large scale mobility crop up when population expand beyond available resources, forcing people to seek opportunities elsewhere. The most prominent of the population types is that which had been induced by a person's search for economic advancement. Most of the movement of the Nigerian peoples, however, has been voluntary. Individuals and families have sought improved living conditions and opportunities based on the need to better their economic lot. However, this work looks at a unique aspect of the dynamics of migration out of Nigeria within the contexts of social and generational aspirations, a situation where 'checking out' of the country was based mainly on the status and stature it conferred on the emigrant and his or her family. Migration in this regard would present special demographic and developmental features that are of scholarly interest. This however imposes a special strain since the work on this would be painstaking and tedious.

In order to facilitate a clear understanding of the issues at stake, a tight connection would be made between rising generational aspirations and migration. If there was a generation seriously affected by the change in the societal structure as happened in Nigeria in the 1980s and 1990s it was the youthful generation between the ages of ten and forty. The effects of various economic restructuring strategies, most especially SAP on the lives, studies and career of this generation would readily make them a fledgling reservoir of opponents of the corrupt and oppressive ruling class. This would intensify what Gurr (1985:54) characterised as the “material inequalities and group conflict” within the Nigerian state and society. This generation did not feel psychologically part of the ‘Nigeria Project’- euphemism for nation-building. A desire to find solace anywhere and by all means therefore developed which cut across the population group. This was the mindset that Nigeria does not want them (Babalola, 2007). This precipitated a herd instinct that made the group to head for the borders irrespective of their economic or social status

Migration Patterns of the 1990’s

New migratory circuits would develop on the African continent in the decade of the 1990s. Three directions were quite popular in Africa: –Southwards i.e. South Africa, Botswana and Swaziland; northwards i.e. Algeria and Morocco (mostly as staging posts for Europe); and, in West Africa- Benin Republic, pre-civil war Cote D’Ivoire, and Ghana. There were different reasons adduced by various youths for their chosen destinations. In the movement towards South Africa for instance glamour, excitement and adventure became prevalent reasons for the boys, while for the girls; marriage and adventure were important factors. These seem largely a response to poorly functioning national economy, a dilapidated social sector, insufficient productive capital and a rising demand for better quality of life.

Ghana has been a favourite country for Nigerians seeking a qualitative existence in the last decade and a half. In a data published in 2002 by Ronald Inglehart and Hans Dieter Klingemann in the chapter entitled “Genes, Culture, Democracy, and Happiness”, showed that in surveys conducted in 64 countries between 1990 and 1998, while Nigeria ranked 33rd in ‘Life Satisfaction (the percentage of those who say they are “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with their lives) and 36th in ‘Subjective Well-being’ (Happiness and Life Satisfaction), Ghana ranked 8th in Life Satisfaction and 25th in Subjective Well-being (Lampe 2003:7). Thus of the non-industrialised world surveyed i.e Nigeria, Ghana, Colombia, Ghana performed well as a country where premium is placed on qualitative existence.

The website dedicated to a Nigeria movie star and budding singer would seem to have thrown some light on the ‘quality of life’ issue. A commentator, *Bigmomma* (2003) while reacting to a comment by a critic on why Genevieve Nnaji should go to faraway Ghana to record her song avowed in a layman’s language:

I mean there is nothing wrong with going to Ghana to record music. Quality wise I myself (sic) will go to Ghana to record cos the sound quality of their productions are better than naija (Nigeria) own. Yall don’t crucify me on this one this is what I have tested and found (sic) to be true.

The album titled “One Logologo Line” was subsequently launched on Saturday December 11, 2004 at La Badi Beach Hotel in Accra, Ghana.

Reuben Abati (2004), famous Nigerian journalist would provide the most salient information about the movement of Nigerians to Ghana: “Social infrastructure works with clockwork precision; exports have increased. The country is a major tourist attraction for all categories of foreigners including Nigerians who are setting up homes and companies in Ghana. Accra is only forty-five minutes away from Lagos by air; every weekend, there are Nigerians heading in that country; I know a number of families planning to spend Xmas in Accra away from the confusion in Nigeria.”

In a similar vein, out of the ten people I have already interviewed and who are connected with Ghana in different ways, two affirmed that they chose to go to Ghana for their sabbatical leave rather than stay in a better paying Nigerian University because of the quality of life in Ghana. The other eight interviews conducted with acquaintances, neighbours and friends whose children or friends are in Ghanaian Universities were of the opinion that academic programmes are much more stable in Ghana and in Nigeria and this informed that country as their choice of intellectual refuge.

Since the mid-1990s, there has been some evidence of return migration to Ghana. The World Bank (1994) has attributed this partly to the remarkable improvement in the Ghanaian economy in relation to the economies of those countries, which initially attracted them. The foregoing presaged the reality that a lot of Nigerians have chosen to settle in Ghana due to the progress recorded by the Ghanaian society. So orderly is life in Ghana that many Nigerians have willingly given up their economic and social lives in Nigeria and relocated to Ghana, while others go for holidays. A major figure in this pattern of migration is Dele Momodu, journalist, socialite and the publisher of Ovation Magazine who used to publish his magazine in Nigeria but now lives and publishes the magazine in Ghana.

There is no doubt that Nigerian migrants to other countries in Africa, most especially South Africa were encouraged by the search for the good life. The effect of selective and unequal urban development and the growing disparity between the rich and the poor have further ennobled the desire to migrate by a new generation of Nigerians. This phenomenon has become widespread to the extent that in a survey I recently carried out among some secondary school and university students and graduates, many now dream of leaving the country after their studies.¹

However, it would appear that South Africa in particular, and southern African region in general are the dominant points of destination on the continent (With South Africa being the most favoured because of its cultural closeness to Europe). Several of the professionals such as teachers, lawyers and doctors were initially encouraged to help the newly independent nation to stabilize. But these merely constituted the advance guard for the deluge that would follow later. Many of those who left would later send for friends, girlfriends and relatives to join them. The rapid expansion of the economy and the political stability enjoyed by the country encouraged others. Thus, out of the thousands of Nigerians in South Africa today, a sizeable proportion was actually gainfully employed in Nigeria before leaving for South Africa. Many of them chose to stay and settle in the country. They have become part of the new privileged group.

Conclusion

In summary, the analysis presented above affirms a strong linkage between migration and life satisfaction. There is evidence to suggest that a small but dynamic group of Nigerians have reacted to the inability of the Nigerian state to provide qualitative public services as excuse to move out of the country. While many established families could afford to provide generators for themselves, sink boreholes and go abroad on vacation, countless others were left adrift. Leaving the country for saner climes in Africa represents a kind of catharsis for some Nigerians. There is no doubt that improvements in Nigeria's policies, institutions and structures would slow the out-migration of this group. The problem associated with this phenomenon was captured succinctly by Adeyemi Akintokunbo (2007:11):

Compatriots abroad, I know it is not easy to go home for various reasons, personal, internal and external. I am myself finding it difficult to go home, but that is for a different reason, but go home I must. Those of us who are afraid of going back home are those afraid of taking risks; not that I blame them (I

am perhaps guilty of this myself); we have a fear of the unknown happening in Nigeria- but then we all know what happens in Nigeria, don't we? We do not want to leave our families and comfortable and relatively convenient lives in the foreign countries where we reside and enter into the harsh environment of our country- lack of water, electricity, good schools, good healthcare system, good roads and transportation system, lack of security and the corruption. How can I ensure that if my child born abroad falls sick in Nigeria, I would be able to get the same quality of treatment I am currently getting...?

The role of the 'CNN-effect' in enhancing the incentives for such migration cannot be underestimated. The availability of Cable and satellite television networks has served as impetus to such groups to achieve a desire and expectations regarding improvements in the quality of life. Access to how the 'other half' lives has further buoyed the desire for a good life.

Notes

¹ Several respondents interviewed were of the opinion that life outside the country would be more fulfilling and rewarding. Fifty per cent of those interviewed preferred to go to South Africa; twenty to Cote D'Ivoire; ten to Ghana; ten to Botswana and Swaziland; five to Benin Republic. The other five per cent would go anywhere- just as long as it is outside Nigeria. There is still so much work to be done on migrants who left in search of the good life.

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Appendix 1

Sample of Questionnaire used to be provided