

Exploring “CHECKING OUT” Legacy: Migration, Popular Culture, and the
Formation of Class Identity up to 2007

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Abstract

It is crucial to avoid making assumptions about the reasons behind migration out of Nigeria. Not all migrants are leaving due to poverty, squalor, deprivation, and need. It is also incorrect to assume that migration is only focused on advanced countries like Europe and North America. These assumptions overlook a critical aspect of migration from Nigeria - the social factors that influence emigration. This study sheds light on an often-overlooked aspect of the reasons for migration out of Nigeria, namely the gap between social needs and social reality. This gap creates tension between the middle-class ideology of consumption and the reality of upward social mobility. Consequently, a counterculture of "Checking out" emerged, which signifies leaving the country not out of poverty but for prestige and comfort. Starting from around 1989, a new generation of young people became "embassy crawlers" and "visa hunters," which became a form of social status. Shockingly, around two out of every five university undergraduates and college students were more interested in leaving Nigeria than seeking employment after graduation. Similarly, employed young people preferred to leave their jobs for glamour and excitement overseas. Consequently, money that could have been used for material comfort was spent on visa application fees.

Key words: Migration, Popular culture, Class identity, 'Checking Out'

Introduction

When it comes to migration out of Nigeria, traditional measures tend to focus on economic migrants heading to Western countries. However, there is a lack of literature on migration as a means of personal fulfilment and societal satisfaction, particularly from an Afrocentric perspective. This is largely due to the overshadowing of this group by discussions surrounding the loss of skilled labour to the continent, attempts by West African migrants to enter Europe through dangerous means, and the financial contributions of sub-Saharan Africans living overseas. It's worth noting that migration within Africa is just as complex as overseas migration, with various patterns and strategies observed. People may migrate for economic reasons, to escape political instability and more. The benefits of such migration are immeasurable for both the individual and their home community. The United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) Executive Summary supports this. 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).¹

According to the United Nations Regional Fact Sheet on migration, in 2005, approximately 16 million international migrants resided in sub-Saharan African countries, making up 2.1% of the total population. South Africa is the primary destination for migrants in the region. Many of these migrants are involved in short-term, long-term, and circular migration flows. Some people were motivated by economic reasons, while others were driven by unfulfilled expectations of their quality of life at home.² This study offers an understanding of a migrant community driven by quality-of-life reasons and sheds light on the impact it has on popular culture and global migration.

Methodological and Theoretical Issues

Studies on regional and international migration in West Africa have examined various aspects, including forced and economic migration. However, personal decisions to achieve a better social status have not been given much attention. This work focuses on the dynamics of migration out of Nigeria in the context of social and generational aspirations. It explores the belief that leaving the country confers status, upward mobility, and conquest. The study traces the causes and consequences of Nigerian emigration abroad, contributing to the historiography of Nigerian emigration by combining historical and empirical methods. The research draws on information from migrants, their families, and potential migrants from different parts of Nigeria through interviews and newspaper reports. It evaluates migration decisions at both local and international levels, as well as the strategies individuals pursue and the cultural factors affecting these strategies. This approach differs from that of Samir Amin, who argued that migrants' choices are predetermined by the system. However, further data is still being collected through questionnaires from respondents, and the study focuses on two of Nigeria's thirty-six states, Oyo and Lagos.

Research on migration in and out of Africa agrees that international migration is crucial for the continent's development, welfare and stability. However, previous studies have focused on communities rather than individuals. This study confirms that many factors, including microeconomic and social motivations, influence migration decisions. The neo-classic or Harris-Todaro approach suggests that differences in real or expected income often drive the supply of migrants. This study assumes that migration between two countries may decrease if there is a perception that the overall quality of life has significantly improved in the lower-income country. People may leave due to physical attacks or abuse, poor service delivery, an uncertain investment

¹United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), "International Migration and Development for Africa" (Executive Summary). <http://www.uneca.org>

²Adesina, O.C. *Outward Bound, Tangled Nightmares: Rereading Globalization in Contemporary Nigeria* In Boike Rehbein, *Globalization and Inequality in Emerging Societies*, (Hampshire, U.K., Palgrave Macmillan Publishers, 2011) pp. 136-147.

climate, or poor governance at the local or national level.³

The History and Dynamics of Migration in Nigeria

Nigerians have a long history of migrating across the West African sub-region borders. During the pre-colonial era, people frequently moved in search of long-distance trade opportunities and to participate in warfare.⁴ 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 was 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.⁵ 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.⁶ The migration beginning in the 1980's 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 fall in living conditions.⁷ 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

³(<http://siterources.worldbank.org/>)

⁴Toure, Moriba and T.O. Fadayomi (eds), "Migrations Development & Urbanization Policies in sub-Saharan Africa." Dakar, CODESRIA Book Series. (1992).

⁵Anarfi John and Stephen Kwankye with Ofuso-Mensah Ababio and Richmond Tiemok, "Migration from and to Ghana: A Background Paper," Working Paper C4 Issued by the Development Research Centre on Migration, Globalisation and Poverty, University of Sussex, Brighton, U.K (2003)

⁶Eades, J.S(1994). Strangers and Traders: Yoruba Migrants, Markets and the State in Northern Ghana. Trenton.NJ, Africa World Press, Inc.

⁷Mosley, Paul "Policy-Making without Facts: a Note on the Assessment of Structural Adjustment Policies in Nigeria, 1985-1990". African Affairs 91 (1992), pp.227-40.

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 lives in one-room apartments and other cities such as Kaduna, Kano, and 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.⁸ The social circumstances of the urban dwellers remained appalling. It is the problem of substandard dwellings. According to A.Onibokun:

...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 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 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 houses.⁹

The flow of oil revenue into Nigeria in the post-Civil War decade (1970-1980) would buoy the commercial sector and this would in turn lead to the emergence of a more defined class structure. The oil boom gave Nigeria the wealth to import more consumer goods. The revenue would ultimately transform the lifestyles of some sections of the urban population by increasing their consumption of imported goods.¹⁰ 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

⁸Fadayomi, T. O, S.O.Titolola, B.Oni and O.J. Fapounda "Migrations and Development Policies in Nigeria" in Toure, M. and T.O. Fadayomi (eds). Migrations Development & Urbanization Policies in Sub-Saharan Africa. Dakar: CODESRIA Book series (1992). http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTECA/Resources/Migration_Chapter3.pdf

⁹Onibokun, A. "Housing in Nigeria: Demand, Supply and Strategies for the Fifth Plan Period."

¹⁰Braimoh, U.K, "The Nigerian American Trade Relations 1945-1990" Unpublished M.A.Dissertation, Department of History, University of Ibadan. (1994).

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 in 1986 reached a crisis point. The nation then began to experience widespread unemployment of professionals, graduates, secondary and primary school leavers and of unskilled workers.¹¹ 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).¹² 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 kanniarinotoshimewa, otoshinibogbo won* (literally, a 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 a 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

Forced and voluntary migration is induced by several factors. Large-scale mobility crops up when the 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 people, 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. To facilitate a clear understanding of

¹¹Fadayomi, T. O, S.O. Titilola, B. Oni and O.J. Fapounda "Migrations and Development Policies in Nigeria" in Toure, M. and T.O. Fadayomi (eds). Migrations Development & Urbanization Policies in Sub-Saharan Africa. Dakar: CODESRIA Book series (1992). http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTECA/Resources/Migration_Chapter3.pdf

¹²National Concord, Lagos Thursday, June 17. (1999).

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 careers of this generation would readily make them a fledgling reservoir of opponents of the corrupt and oppressive ruling class. This would intensify what Ted Gurr¹³ 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’- a 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.¹⁴ This precipitated a herd instinct that made the group head for the borders irrespective of their economic or social status.

Migration Patterns of the 1990s

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- the 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 a poorly functioning national economy, a dilapidated social sector, insufficient productive capital and a rising demand for a better quality of life. Ghana has been a favourite country for Nigerians seeking a qualitative existence in the last decade and a half. 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, 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 (Lampe2003:7).¹⁵ Thus, of the non-industrialised world surveyed i.e., Nigeria, Ghana, Colombia, Ghana performed well as a country where a premium is placed on qualitative existence.

The website dedicated to a Nigerian movie star and budding singer would seem to have thrown some light on the ‘quality of life issue. A commentator,

¹³Gurr, T.R. “On the Political Consequences of Scarcity and Economic Decline”, *International Studies Quarterly*, 29. (1985).

¹⁴Interview with Babalola, Akeem. Age:41. Businessman, Ibadan 26th May 2007 <http://www.naijarules.com/vb/Genevieve-nnaji-fan-club/6035-ever-doubted-gennys-ability-s...>

¹⁵Lampe, Stephen “Is Nigeria the World’s happiest country?”, *The Comet*, Sunday, October 12. ,(2003)

Bigmomma 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 is better than Naija's (Nigeria's) own. Yall don't crucify me on this one this is what I have tested and found (sic) to be true.¹⁶ The album titled "One Logologo Line" was subsequently launched on Saturday, December 11, 2004, at La Badi Beach Hotel in Accra, Ghana.

Reuben Abati, a 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, Nigerians are heading in that country; I know several families planning to spend Xmas in Accra away from the confusion in Nigeria."¹⁷In a similar vein, out of the ten people I have already interviewed 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 thought that academic programmes are much more stable in Ghana and 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 has attributed this partly to the remarkable improvement in the Ghanaian economy about 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 Ghanaian society.¹⁸So 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

¹⁶Interview with Babalola, Akeem. Age:41. Businessman, Ibadan 26th May 2007
<http://www.naijarules.com/vb/Genevieve-nnaji-fan-club/6035-ever-doubted-gennys-ability-s...>

¹⁷Abati, Reuben, "Famous journalist praises Ghana's democracy in a piece for the Guardian." The University of Texas at Austin, (2004).<http://www.utexas.edu/conferences/africa/ads/133.html> Accessed 07, April, 2007.

¹⁸World Bank, "Adjustment in Africa.Reforms, Results and the Road Ahead." Washington DC. (1994).

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. However, it would appear that South Africa in particular, and the 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 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 an 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

A Compatriots abroad, I know it is not easy to go home for various reasons, personal, internal and external. I am 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'm 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...?¹⁹

The role of the 'CNN effect' in enhancing the incentives for such migration cannot be underestimated. The availability of Cable and satellite television

¹⁹Adeyemi, Akintokunbo, "Reverse migration: Time to go home", Daily Champion Lagos, (Friday, June 29)

networks has served as an impetus for 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.

- This paper was first presented at the African Migrations Workshop on "Understanding Migration Dynamics in the Continent", Accra, Ghana, September 18th – 21st 2007

NOTES

Several respondents interviewed thought 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 the Benin Republic. The other five percent 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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