

THE UNPACKED LUGGAGE: THE STORY OF AFRICAN MIGRATION AND MIGRANTS

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Abstract

Migration though a human right and akin to our humanity takes different turn considering who is involved. African identity is adversely impacted by migration. Migration also attracts different questions and responses when African identity is involved. With an extended years of personal experience as an international migrant of different migratory statuses and of working and living among other migrants especially those of African stock, I know a lot of the experiences of difficulties of being an African migrant today. Starting from applying for a visa to encountering immigration and customs officers at the ports of entry, living and working in a foreign land do not always hold good memories. This paper has studied the phenomenon of migration with a view to finding solutions to it.

Keywords: Africa, Migration, Migrants, Human Rights

Introduction

The theme of this collection, “Migration and African Identity: Question in a Contemporary World,” is important, timely and urgent. This is supported by various waves erupting from the tides of contemporary migration dynamics especially as it affects Africa, replete in global and national media and academic studies.

Migration though a human right and akin to our humanity takes different turn considering who is involved. African identity is adversely impacted by migration. Migration also attracts different questions and responses when African identity is involved. With an extended years of personal experience as an international migrant of different migratory statuses and of working and living among other migrants especially those of African stock, I know a lot of the experiences of difficulties of being an African migrant today. Starting from applying for a visa to encountering immigration and customs officers at the ports of entry, living and working in a foreign land do not always hold good memories.

It is encouraging however, to know that during my years of living outside my country I experienced, love, care and goodwill from good persons and good/efficient government systems and policies. Such success stories need to be told more often and hold together with the entire reality of what it means to be an African migrant.

The allegory of “unpacked luggage” holds together the uncharted world of African migrants. A typical African migrants most times live in the world of in-between. They are nostalgic of home and never home in their new home. This comes with huge cost and implication, especially from identity perspective.

Migration in general

Migration has been part of the history of human civilization contributing to national and human development. Today, however, migration is happening in an increased rate, 46% increase from 2000-2017, with significant impact on various countries of origin, transit and destination and also on the individual human persons on the move. For many reasons associated its complexity and dynamics, migration has become a defining national and regional political issue, as it touches on powerful underlying concerns relating to human rights, international economics, labour demands, security, governance, and a globalised but increasingly unequal world. Most important yet often forgotten the identity of those involved for which we pose a lot of questions for the contemporary world.

At the end of 2018, international migration reached the record high of 258 million, 3% of the global population. Migration is responsible for over 760 million others moving within their countries. It also accounts for 25 million refugees, and more than 68 million displaced persons in the world (UNDESA, 2018).

A good percentage of this number of people on the move is fleeing their countries for a range of reasons: war, poverty, human rights abuses, religious intolerance, persecution, oppression, threats to personal security and peace. Others move merely for purposes of work and family unification.

Migrants’ contributions to global development are enormous. They enrich their host countries’ worldview and economy through the cultures, values, and labour they bring with them. Migrants, especially Diasporas are important agents of development in their homeland by the substantial resources – Economic and Social Remittance – they transmit back home through knowledge, new

opportunities, investments, and philanthropic donations. In 2018, global economic remittances reached record breaking amount of \$689 billion up from \$633 billion in 2017. \$529 billion, 77% of the global total, was remitted to low-income countries, recording an increase of 9.6 percent over the already previous record high of \$483 billion in 2017 (World Bank, 2018). In 2018, Sub-Sahara Africa witnessed a 9.8% increase \$45b in remittances accruing to the region. Nigeria alone netted in \$25b of this total. These remittances are constant sources for funding family sustenance and thus significant in the eradication of poverty (World Bank, 2018).

Migration is drawing a global attention for other reasons too. It is said to have adverse effects on countries. Some of these effects are undue pressure on the job, social security, and services, as well as lifestyle and social fabric of the host countries. Due to migration sending countries struggle with loss of skilled workers, sometimes referred to as brain-drain, and family disintegration and associated loss of cultural identity/values.

Most important, migration makes the global news today because of the challenges and vulnerabilities experienced by many migrants all over the world. On the list of these vulnerabilities are racism, xenophobia, and discrimination that have led to mistreatment of migrants in their host countries.

While a larger number, 150 million out of the 258 million, of the global migration, especially those of labor migration occur within the legal and regular means, for so many reasons including those of lack of legal and regular channels of mobility many people crossing international borders resort to irregular means of migrating. Irregular migration, often associated with journeys through dangerous routes involving long trekking along the deserts and crossing the sea in unsafe vessels, is responsible for uncountable deaths on the Mediterranean sea in recent years. Irregular migration also involve overstay of visa and residential status.

The vulnerability of these prospective migrants is increased by the greed and heartlessness of the operators of the described migration routes, namely smugglers, traffickers in persons and corrupt security officers who exploit the victims. In most cases, many irregular migrants are victims to smugglers and other syndicates who facilitate their movement by issuing these victims false or forged travel documents, including impersonating citizens of a given country.

It is to irregular migration practices that most victims suffer the loss of their identity and history. To enter into a country of destination, some migrants

discard their original nationality, and take up a false one, with forged names and erasing thereof any history behind them including not only nationality but also academic and work history. Some claim things they are not or things that never happened to them in order to get a migratory status. What they realize much later and very late is that the story stays with them, in other words they have assumed a new identity. Unfortunately Africans are the worse victims of this.

In some homelands, diasporas are treated as expendables. They are more or less cash cows in the hands of the families and associates at home. They are useful for their remittances, many Diasporas do not enjoy some basic human and political rights in their homelands, such as dual citizenship and right to vote or hold public/elected offices.

African Experience

Africa shares in the global migration dynamics in its entirety and plays significant role at the different levels of migration international discourse, especially as a continent of origin, transit and destination. Pre-historical accounts date African migration to the story of the movement across the Bering land bridge from the African tropics, through Europe, South Asia, and Southeast Asia to the Northern hemisphere by *Homo Erectus* (the upright man- ancient human ancestor probably from African or Eurasia) 2 million years ago - 15,000 B.C - (Hopkins, 1959; Bae. et al, 2017). Biologists and anthropologists, given recent scientific discoveries suggest an alternative migration wave of associated with *Homo sapiens* (modern man) from Africa (Christopher J. Bae, et al, 2017).

Apart from the homo erectus and homo spaiens speculations, the first sub-Saharan African migration goes back to 200 thousand years ago - characterized by movement from homelands to new territories in search of fertile lands and grazing fields precipitated sometimes by change in climate. Two insightful examples are the Luo tribes, who migrated from Eastern Equatorial state in South Sudan and settled in Uganda, and the Arab expansion of trade and commerce across West African nations (Yohannes Gebresellasi, 1993).

Indeed African civilization and city development is ingrained in movement and continuous movement and settlement of a people from one end to another, from one land to another.

Contemporary story of Trend of African Migration

Some of the migrations in history that have conditioned modern migration into and out of Africa both in trend and intensity include the advent and influx of European explorers, merchants and missionaries in Africa in the 13th century and the slave trade and its abolition in 15th and 19th centuries respectively.

By the 1960s, nearly 300,000 Europeans had settled in Rhodesia and Zambia, and nearly 100,000 in East Africa... there were around 300,000 Asians in East Africa and 621,000 in South Africa (John Richard, 1979). In their case, they had the choice of who they became. In most cases, they were who they were and sometimes forced their host to become like them.

The forced migration of Africans to Europe and North America at the behest of the Europeans for servitude in slave-trade regime was the hallmark of the worst side of migration in history. Between 15th and 19th century over 10 million Africans were transported under inhumane conditions aboard ships to work mainly in plantation farms and industries in Europe and North America; with more than 1 million dead during transit.

It is important to read this history within the context of current event of lost of African life in the Mediterranean Sea and other routes of voyage, including the deserts. It might be right to say that Mediterranean and even the Atlantic are not new to African flesh served them by the callous men who trade and dispose men for profit.

These million Africans were products, articles of sale and beast of burden. With names lost and history erased either by fail of memory or forced at the whims and caprices of their owners, they became what their masters called them or what they made of the sounds they heard on the field of work. That was their new identity. The abolition of slave trade in Britain in 1807 began the ex-slave repatriation program, which encouraged Africans, especially those in North America to return to their ancestral homeland. Examples of such repatriation program are the resettlement of Africans in Liberia and Sierra Leone.

These Africans played a major role in the development of many Western nations, especially the new world.

Colonization and independence saw migration of Africans to Europe—following the pattern of moving to their former colonial countries mostly for studies and skill acquisition—many will return after studies. Later, post-independence events resulting from political instability, lack of economic opportunity gave rise to the

form of migration – movement of highly-educated and skilled Africans to Europe and North America.

Unlike in the preceding era when African migrants would always return to Africa, in this period, many would seek permanent residence in their host countries. This has remained the major trend of African migratory flow to date. Often the dynamics of this prevalent migration trend is captured in the categorization and popularization of concepts as brain drain, brain gain and brain waste with their impacts and challenges.

Though a high amount of intra-continental migration goes on in Africa, most often, popular and trending narrative in contemporary migration is that African is emptying into Europe! Millions of Africans are waiting to cross to Europe at the first opportunity. Three assumptions underlying such narratives are that African migration is: high and increasing; mainly directed towards Europe; and driven by poverty and violence. Such perceptions are based on stereotypes, assumptions, selective observation or journalistic impressions rather than theoretically informed empirical research.

Studies reveal that over 80% of African migration is intra continent. 90% of West African migration is within the region; 60% in South and equivalent in East Africa. 10% of North Africa cross the sea due to proximity and shared values with Europe. In terms of developmental impact, AfDB reports that regional migration *within* Africa has more positive effects on development and poverty reduction than migration *outside* of Africa (AfDB, 2018). Unfortunately, this unsung reality is often not captured in the global data on remittance that often focuses on the European and North American flows.

Contributions and Impact of African Migration

As in former times, different classes of African immigrants and diaspora, skilled and unskilled, contribute significantly to the economic, social and cultural development of their countries of destination. There are reports and news of Africans making strides in different areas of the development of their host countries especially in Europe and North America. In 2018, African migrants in the US were reported to have contributed “more than \$10.1 billion in federal taxes, \$4.7 billion in state and local taxes, and most importantly, they have significant economic clout to the point of \$40.3 billion in spending power” (Simmons, 2018).

Yet migrants and diaspora, especially those from Africa, are often faced with situations of racial, xenophobic mistreatment and discrimination in every region in the world. The phenomenon is increasing in extent and severity. The prevalent utterances of people on the political trail, from leaders and members of communities, portray this animosity towards those others who are at borders begging for hands of love and rescue as they flee from violence and hardship. Donald Trump of USA in his nationalistic arrogance recently referred to African migrants as escapees from shithole countries with nothing to offer and against whom the borders of his country must be shot.

The saddest part of the story of the African migration is that Africa is not fair to Africa. Sometimes the story is worse. Africa is the continent with strictest intra-continent movement. According to the Africa Visa Openness Index Report launched by the African Development Bank (AfDB), citizens of African countries require visas to travel to 55% of countries within the continent. African's fragmentation is against Africa's interest in terms of trade - Europe-Europe 60%; Asia-Asia -48%; North-America-north America - 50%; Africa-Africa - 15%.

Considered from the migrants perspectives, worst story of inhuman treatments, abuse of human rights, xenophobic and racial discrimination, destruction of human life and properties experienced by migrants happen within the walls of the African continent. The realities in Libya, South Africa and other areas echo these atrocities. These attitudes raise critical and sincere questions to the often acclaimed identity of Africa as land of hospitality and brotherhood.

Conclusion: Expectation and looking forward

It is important to emphasize that African identity has benefitted from and benefits migration. On the other hand, it has been dealt with heavy blows by migration and conversely has marred attempts at effective migration management. Many a time, these are supported by mere speculations and emotions with little or no empirical research-based evidence. Lack of and efficient sharing of data constitutes a major challenge to migration management that will benefit the African identity.

This once more makes the case of the importance, timeliness and urgency the theme of Migration and African Identity. Questions need to be raised and posed to contemporary world regarding this. However, unlike the prevalent practice, this time around, these questions must be raised and posed by Africans.

Such questions must take on the dominant media depiction of African migration with solely images of massive refugee flows and 'boat migration', and alarmist rhetoric of politicians suggesting an impending African immigrants' invasion. Not only media and politicians, but also scholars fuel the image of a rising tide of poverty-driven African emigration.

Success in this area calls for willingness to engage in a sincere conversation that leaves nothing out of the table but takes the risk of confronting all comfort zones so that we may indeed get to and tackle the issues at the root of the topic in hand. Instead of a paradigm of dry and abstracted discussion, this conversation ought to be ambitious and audacious in producing research with actionable proposals that would improve our responses, more so in being proactive than reactive in the area of African migration. This is what academic is known for. Academics needs to bequeath the global, particularly African policy makers and implementers, a vital ingredient for making effective policy that will enhance the migration management that will salvage the decimated African identity by unwitting migration narrative.

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