

Scaling Protected Western Fence: The Fate of Nigeria Immigrants to Europe

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The European Conference on Cultural Studies 2014
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

The world is gradually shrinking that at the press of a button events happening in far-flung part of the earth could be followed live via cable network. Globalization or capitalist penetration of every economy is the new phenomenon. Industrialized nations of the West are growing richer and having access to natural resources of the third world. Most of the third world countries are experiencing harsh economic turn. World trade organization (WTO) continues to harp on the need for free trade which is beneficial to the developed countries. Yet developed Western countries mount an impenetrable fortress to ward off immigrants from their paradise. Nigerian immigrants' device different strategies to scale protected Western fence at great cost. Desperate Nigerians trying to escape economic difficulties at home change citizenship as one changes his clothes. A cabal dealing on sale of international passport of various countries exist in Nigeria and for a good price valid passports are procured that could yield one a place in the enclosed economic safe-havens of the world. While citizens of the West enjoy unrestricted free-movement from one part of the world to the other, even as tourists, Nigerian citizens seeking economic opportunities in Europe are quarantined, threatened with imprisonment, deportation and denied such access. Employing newspaper, magazine reports and other extant secondary materials including oral interviews of those in the business of securing visas in Nigeria and migration theories, the paper will attempt an analysis of this phenomenon.

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INTRODUCTION

In the face of adversity, whether natural or man-made, the survival instincts in man come to the fore. When threatened by natural disasters such as drought, earthquake, hurricane or lava eruptions or tsunami both man and beast strive to escape to a more hospitable environment. Displaced persons during wars also make efforts to move to safe-havens away from the theatre of conflicts. These movements whether induced by natural disaster or man-made are often frowned at by those forced to host the displaced persons. This is due to pressure the additional mouths would add to the inadequate scarce resources at their disposal.

It is due to economic adversity, political turmoil and religious conflict that have propelled Nigerians to migrate to economic safe- havens of Europe in their droves. Their quests have received rude rebuff. Yet the industrialized nations of Europe preach free trade and have unimpeded access to the natural resources of Nigeria. Trade liberalization has been promoted by the International Monetary Fund, IMF, World Bank, World Trade Organization, WTO, and its underpinning globalization as beneficial to third world countries. This is indeed a ruse to have access to the markets of these poor developing nations. In 1997, after Nigeria removed all restrictions on the importation of textile in line with the WTO agreements, its textile industry virtually collapsed. The local textile industry suffered job losses of over 100,000 as it operates below 30 per cent of capacity. As Isaac Osuoka (1999:43) aptly stated:

Governments of poor countries are prevented from formulating regulations that will protect local industries, the environment, healthcare and the protection of local culture as such regulations will violate the WTO agreements.

The whole essence of globalization or capitalist penetration of every economy would remain hollow unless it is accompanied by free movement of labour both skilled and unskilled. Globalization has been described as the spread of worldwide practices, relations, consciousness, and organization of social life. It has dramatically transformed the lives of billions of people globally. However; globalization has been criticized for strengthening the economic dominance of the industrialized nations while impoverishing the weak economic base of the developing countries of the south. This is the crux of the argument of Petrella (2007:87) when he opined that "...globalization increases dependence, peripheralization and pauperization of the less developed economies as against the affluence, convergence and integration of the core capitalist states." Critics have also lampooned the recommendation of the same panacea for different economic ailments by the apostles of globalization such as IMF, WTO and World Bank. The Nobel Prize winning economist Joseph E. Stiglitz (2007:575) blamed these monetary institutions for their roles in worsening, rather than resolving, global economic crisis. He singled out IMF for its homogenizing, "One-size- fits –all" approach that fails to take into account national differences. The stringent economic conditionalities foisted on countries facing economic turmoil by the IMF and World Bank has indeed exacerbated economic difficulties in those countries rather than ameliorating them.

This paper will attempt to analyze the different strategies adopted by Nigerians to scale the protected Western fence, the hazards and coping devices of surviving in

Europe and the shattering experience of arrest, detention and deportation as an illegal migrant and way out of the dehumanizing experiences.

DIFFERENT STRATEGIES OF SCALING PROTECTED WESTERN FENCE:

The biting unemployment situation in Nigeria among youths without any social security scheme to cushion its effect ignites the migrating spirit of Nigerian man and woman. Again, the protectionist tendencies of the industrialized nations of Europe make it difficult to procure genuine travel documents or secure visa. These two factors push people into desperate measures to overcome the obstacles to travel. Indeed, even where Nigerians could procure legal document to travel, securing visa interview appointment is a herculean task. Emeka Okeke (6th September, 2009) stated thus:

The embassy would give a telephone number to be called to book for visa appointment. You could call the number for eternity and nobody would respond. Upon discreet inquiry one realizes the embassy had only one hour in a day to respond to request for interviews.

The realities are that dubious embassy officials fill in the quota for the day's interview and leave hapless thousands of applicants struggling to reach them through a telephone line that had been jammed by the thousands of others desperate to get through.

This unnecessary barricade at key European embassies in Nigeria gave rise to the presence of touts. Thus, each embassy had a colony of touts or agents through whom one could first secure an interview appointment and sometimes through whose influence the procurement of visa could be made possible as well.

Besides, someone else passport could be bought, the information page which carries the persons passport photograph torn- apart and replaced with a new information page carrying the new person's photograph who bought the passport. This could be done easily in forgery centres in Lagos – the popular Oluwole street in Lagos where everything under the sun could be forged and something nearly the same as the original gotten. Unfortunately for some migrants they could run into problems: if they were unlucky to come across more careful immigration officials both in Nigeria and outside Nigeria. Nonetheless, there are devices installed in many immigration entry points in some parts of Europe that could detect such forgeries which leads to the culprit being apprehended, detained and deported subsequently. One could imagine the social and economic consequences of such a misadventure. All the money spent buying such a passport, money paid to swindlers, who expunged and replaced parts of the passports and information page would have been in vain. This often led to frustration of the victims, occasional suicide and deaths wish rather than being deported to an unbearable and inhospitable environment like Nigeria (Emeka Okeke, 6th September, 2009).

However, in recent times most visa appointments are secured through embassy websites. Even at that it is still subject to manipulation. Assuming one wants the visa appointment quickly one could go through contacts. In countries where there is no

pressure for people to travel the available window for visa appointment would not be under pressure and the need to bribe anybody would be non-existent.

Another strategy employed by desperate Nigerians to travel to Europe, though the most dangerous, was through the Sahara desert. There are illegal human trafficking agencies that have very powerful connections that nurture illegal migrations. These networks are highly sophisticated illegal migration system ran by organized mafia. They could procure travel papers of all nationalities and can make landing and take-off easy once the pay is good. The Lagos angle of this mafia can take their “human cargo” by road to Cotonou in Benin Republic or Lome in Togo. From either of these cities they travel northwards. From Lome they travel to the town of Cinkasse, a border town between Togo and Burkina Faso. At Cinkasse the migrants would enter the small town called Bittou from where they could board a northward vehicle to Ouagadougou, capital of Burkina Faso (Emeka Okeke, 6th September, 2009). In Ouagadougou they could decide to travel to Mauritania or Libya from where they move towards the Mediterranean shores of North Africa. From those shores the migrants can enter the Spanish islands of Canary or the Italian island of Lampadusa. This hazardous crossing of the Mediterranean by Nigerian migrants on perilous boats have been catastrophic. So many people have perished while the few that survived end up in detention or as political asylum. But as Aderanti Adepoju and Arie van der Wiel (2007:17) opined:

Many irregular migrants who fail to enter Europe settle in North Africa rather than face the humiliation of returning home. But the most costly price of irregular migration is loss of life itself. About 3000 Africans are believed to be drowning each year while attempting illegal crossings to Europe.

Another loophole which the Nigerian syndicate exploited to move migrants to Europe were the visa-free national passports of the Gambia and Guinea Bissau to United Kingdom and Portugal respectively. Until the military incursion in the Gambian politics, the Gambian international passport was visa free to the United Kingdom, UK. Nigerians normally sneak into the country through the assistance of this mafia and procure the Gambian passport, claiming to be Gambians. The Gambia is English speaking and Nigerians could easily pose as Gambians and enter UK unmolested. However, the Guinea Bissau was a different ball game. Guinea Bissau is a Portuguese speaking nation yet many Nigerians brave it to travel with Guinea Bissau international passport. This is fraught with its consequences. Consider this scenario where a Nigerian, an English speaking man and woman, without any knowledge of Portuguese language, flies into Lisbon with Guinea Bissau passport. If he or she is unfortunate that a Portuguese immigration official speaks Portuguese to him or her then the misadventure ends. He would be apprehended and repatriated and all the investment ruined (Ikechukwu Ugwuagbo, 15 July, 2014).

Nevertheless, the most dangerous stratagem desperate young men and women employ to enter Europe is by stow away. As ships that brought goods from different parts of the world discharge their cargos, frustrated young Nigerians in league with dubious dock workers at Lagos ports, Port Harcourt, Calabar and Warri harbours are sneaked into the ships with their bags and food items often without the knowledge of the ship captains on journeys to Europe and other parts of the world. This is one of the most

dangerous means of illegal migrations because many of such migrants have had themselves thrown overboard in the high sea. Often the ship captain in order to avoid being seen as part of the mafia that engages in illegal migration which would make him liable to fine in the country where he was heading had no other choice than to eject the illegal human cargo into the high sea.

According to Emeka Okeke sometime ago a Thailand bound ship captain had to make a detour on the high sea and came back to Tinian Island port, Lagos, to off-load an illegal human cargo of twenty (20) young men discovered hiding in the engine room of his ship when they left Nigeria. They were all handed over to the Nigerian immigration authority for debriefing and possible prosecution (Emeka Okeke, 6th September, 2009).

An informant and a stowaway survivor narrated how economic hardship aborted his secondary school education forcing him to engage in menial works to raise enough money to embark on the journey to Germany. Himself and his colleagues after bribing the dockworkers at Port Harcourt Wharf Nigeria were advised to buy paracetamol drug, bottled water and Cabin biscuit and were hidden in a ship compartment bound for Daura, Cameroon. From there they entered Congo Brazzaville and finally got into Johannesburg, South Africa. It was in South Africa that they met a lady that helped them to procure South African national passport with which they traveled to Berlin, Germany. On the fourth day of their stay in Berlin, his fellow compatriot had high fever and went out to buy drugs and the police arrested him. He revealed where they were staying and both of them were arrested and deported to South Africa the next day (Ikechukwu Ugwuagbo, 15 July 2014). The South African immigration authority after series of interrogation insisted that they were not from South Africa. After months of detention the South African authorities claimed that they were either from Cameroon or Nigeria and deported them to Cameroon. The Cameroon gendarmes felt that they might be from the English speaking part of the country and released them. It was from there they worked their way back to Nigeria.

COPING DEVICES OF SURVIVING IN EUROPE

Many Nigerians equate Europe to a paradise on earth with automated railroad networks, uninterrupted power supply and beautiful castles. The allurements are great and many are prepared to stake everything including well-paid jobs in banks and secure, teaching positions in Universities in Nigeria to drift to Europe. No sooner had they arrived than the illusion is dispelled. Europe is a law governed society and their well-advertised social security benefit is not intended for all particularly illegal migrants. This notion of a land flowing with milk and honey needs to be refuted. Adepoju and Wiel (2007:18) have advocated that Nigerian government should embark on programmes to demystify the perception of youths that the roads of EU countries are paved with gold. This is because many youths rely on information from their peers but such information tends to be distorted, exaggerated and misleading. Indeed, becoming a “been to” – a term that is commonly used to refer to those who have traveled abroad – has become one of society’s cultural ideals. The quest to travel to Europe could be demystified through expanding the economy and enacting similar social security benefits as obtained in Europe to assuage the biting youth unemployment in Nigeria and not through rhetoric.

European legal and political systems have provisions to accept and accommodate people who suffer one form of persecution or the other – political and religious persecution. An asylum applicant must adduce sufficient evidence that he or she suffers political persecution. Political crisis in different parts of Africa give Nigerians the *raison d'être* to change nationality in order to gain political asylum. Political turmoil in the Sudan, Congo Democratic Republic, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Somalia are capitalized upon by Nigerians to apply for asylum in EU countries. They discard their identity and assume the nationality of these troubled spots. There exists a syndicate who procures international passports and travel documents of such nationalities. But even after procuring such documents they still find it difficult to convince foreign office authorities that they are bona fide citizens of those countries. However, these unfounded claims of Nigerian asylum seekers enable them to buy time while their applications are being processed since such application can take months or years to conclude. Nevertheless if it is not in favour of the applicant, then such asylum seeker would be arrested and deported (Emeka Okeke, 6th September, 2009). Thus, it is difficult to use national passport to establish true national identities of migrants. What is even worse, in the case of boat capsized off the Italian coast of Lampedusa and Spanish Canary Islands the nationalities could be varied and true identities of the dead lost forever.

Another method Nigerian migrants exploit to prolong their stay in Europe and avoid being deported is to contract a marriage with a European woman. Through such marriage a migrant can procure resident permit and even work permit. However, more often than not this kind of marriage can lead an immigrant to a lot of problems because 80 percent of such marriages are consummated between the social dregs of European society and migrants. Often, in less than three months after the contractual of the marriage, the migrants are thrown out of their homes by such women who are strongly protected under their matrimonial laws. What is even more, such women can go further to lodge a complaint to the police- complaints of matrimonial violence against such migrant could lead to arrest, trial and eventual sentence and possibly deportation if the sentence is under the penal code (Emeka Okeke, 6th September, 2009). In some cases such marriages are “arranged” with European ladies for a price to enable migrants legalize their stay. Thereafter voluntary divorce is actualized without any altercation.

There are other migrants who do not care to legalize their papers and live in different parts of Europe illegally. These groups of migrants perform illegal jobs popularly called black jobs. This type of job is provided by Europeans who know they are breaking European laws by providing jobs to people who are undocumented labour-wise but are constrained to err because such labour is provided very cheaply. These people work under inhuman conditions in remote parts of Europe. Indeed, some of these migrants including those whose stay had been regularized and those yet to be regularized sometimes for lack of jobs in addition to pressure from homes or the syndicates who bankrolled their trips and assisted in the procurement of their papers, go into criminality: Prostitution and drug peddling. It is easier for women to go into prostitution because of the permissive European laws which recognize the trade of harlotry as a time hallowed business. In Holland harlots pay tax on their income. But those who go into drug pushing have it more roughly as drug is a highly prohibited trade in the whole of Europe. Although drugs and prostitution are businesses with

high turnover dividends they are embedded with risk. And as Olukoyode Thomas (2004:47) pointed out:

there are a few living in affluence, but one needs the heart of a lion to do what they do. The women are into prostitution, while the men hawk drugs. Most of the money the prostitute earns is used to service debt they own their madams or sponsors that is the person who brought them to Italy. They stand on the road half naked in summer or winter. The men hawk cocaine and heroin on the streets. All you need to do this is a mobile phone and a car. The more junkies you have, the more money you make.

The fate of Sisi, one of the characters in the novel *On Black Sisters' Street* (Unigwe:2010:293) who defied the Lagos boss that organizes a prostitution ring in Europe to opt for a more decent way of life, had befallen many other girls who dared to renege on their agreement with their sponsors. Sisi was murdered for refusing to continue to sale her body when she found love. Some who engage in prostitution in Europe are victims of human trafficking. They have been beguiled with promises of well-paid jobs in Europe only to be entrapped in the business of harlotry to defray the cost of their sponsorship. A report noted that at least 60 percentage of foreign prostitution in Italy hail from African countries, the majority from Nigeria. It added that Nigerian and Italian authorities estimated that there are 10,000 to 15,000 Nigerian prostitutes in Italy (Bakare: 2006:28-9). A UN estimates indicated that trafficking in persons generated seven to ten billion dollars annually for the traffickers, the third largest profits for illicit activities behind arms dealing and narcotic trafficking. No matter the subterfuge deployed by Nigerian migrants life in Europe is like a horror tale.

SHATTERED DREAMS OF NIGERIAN MIGRANTS

Despite the strong quest of Nigerians to immigrate to Europe, many have had their dreams shattered and many more never lived to tell their story. The syndicates that run this trade are dubious, deceptive and manipulative. They thrive on the ignorance of their victims, mostly school drop outs, unemployed graduates roaming the cities and those displaced and dispossessed through incessant communal and sectarian violence in Nigeria. Only few greedy Nigerians are caught in the web of these duplicitous ones. These merchants of death make outlandish promises of contacts in every European country capable of offering their prey instant job upon landing in Europe. Many families have been deceived into selling their land in the villages in order to “buy” visa for a member of the family to travel abroad. Unfortunately, these migrants are abandoned in the dark corners of North Africa while a large proportion perishes in the desert journey due to thirst. According to Oghogho Obayuwana (2005:40):

It is the story of modern Slavery, whereby unsuspecting persons, the gullible and beguiled of the dark corners of our cities, towns and villages are prowled upon by urban renegades luring them away from their homes, with the promise of an El Dorado in faraway Europe. But the European destination soon

turn out to be some street corners in Algeria, Cote D'Ivoire, Togo, Libya Morocco, Tunisia and even Sudan.

These stranded migrants do incredible things to survive and many end up in prison. About 4,000 Nigerian destitute live in Libya, many of them engaged as sex workers while others do car cleaning and petty trading. Nigerian migrants do not only change nationality they also change names. According to the then Nigerian ambassador to Libya, Ibrahim Mohammed (2005:41), when they arrived Libya they adopt desert names (Islamic names) and therefore when they ran foul of the laws and they were to have their limbs amputated, they create problem for the Nigerian Embassy in Libya. They would not like to be subjected to justice according to Islamic creed but the host authorities presumed that they were Muslims because of their names. Mr. Mohammed (2005:41), further stated that "if you see them in the prisons here you will weep. They are terribly emaciated with no adequate attention. Most of them are already sick. Our citizens constitute a sizeable percentage of aliens in Libyan jails". It is disheartening that our youths are allowed to be debased and dehumanized by the few disgruntled syndicates engaged in human trafficking. The Nigeria government should uproot this menace and end the scourge. If indeed the youths are the human capital of the nation they should not be allowed to be cattle off into the 21st century trans- Saharan slavery.

Nigerians are routinely hounded throughout Europe and deported on flimsy excuses. Between 1999 and 2000 about 800 Nigerian women were deported from Italy. Also in 2001 about 10,000 were also sent back to Nigeria from Italy (Osita Agbu: 2005:73). In 2012, 62 Nigerians were deported from Rome over allegations of immigration default, drug trafficking and other related issues. Even South Africa, the once beleaguered nation that Nigerian authorities hosted and sponsored in higher institutions during apartheid era now took delight in deporting Nigerians. Over 300 Nigeria's were deported from Johannesburg in September, 2012 (Mbamalu and Shadare: 2012:1-2).

Nigerians' craze to travel abroad and work is giving the country a bad name. Even highly qualified professionals with good degrees from British universities are not treated equally with their white counterparts. According to a Nigerian resident in London (Olukayode: 2004:47):

Forget about my credentials, in my profession, your skin determines your destiny. I did my secondary and other education here. Yet, I can't get cases. I have to rely on a Whitman's chamber.

Many Nigerians are overcome by the feeling of shame to pick their pieces and return home when they realize that the El Dorado is a complete sham. Many medical doctors, engineers, lawyers, accountants are performing demeaning jobs such as cab driving, cleaning and security jobs in European cities rather than return home. It is indeed painful that these human capitals should lay farrow abroad. There is urgent need for Nigerian government to restore the dignity of Nigerians being daily eroded by uncontrolled migration.

CONCLUSION

Migrants are attracted to sources of wealth as moth is to light. Europe is the foremost part of the industrialized world, well endowed, and better governed. It is its fabled wealth that many migrants are irresistibly drawn to. But Europe is a fortress which only the rich and powerful could easily access. In spite of its insurmountable odds, Nigerian migrants, many of them deluded by the grandiose wealth to be attained, stake everything, their patrimony and even life to attain. Many forged travel documents to actualize their quest to partake in this alchemy that would banish excruciating poverty in their lives. Others stow away in ships under turbulent seas to reach their destination-Europe. While a lot more defy the Sahara desert to cross the perilous Mediterranean Sea to embrace the cherished El Dorado more often in vain. The migrants' attempt to get round this fortress Europe has cost so many lives in recent times. Between January and early July 2014 over 500 migrants drowned while trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea on boats off the Italian coast. Survivors of another shipwreck confirmed that about 75 migrants lost their lives trying to cross into Italy. The fixation of migrants to reach Italy is buttressed by an account of a Nigerian embassy official in Tripoli, Libya. He narrated how one of the rafters ferrying some 20 Nigerians capsized and the victims were drowning. When help came from a Maltese military vessel on patrol, one of the six Nigerians rescued eventually regained consciousness. He inquired from his kind attendants where he was and was promptly told. To the dismay of his custodians who were expecting an effusion of gratitude to God and the rescuers, he blotted out from the recesses of his dreamy fixation: "Oh, take me to Italy. I said I'm going to Italy, not -Malta" He had to be taken to a mental asylum (Obayuwana: 2005:41). Many migrants suffer from this fixation and are psychologically wrecked.

Indeed, the European coast guards especially Italy, Spain and Malta have performed chivalrous deeds to minimize the tragedy that would have been associated with migrants trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea with rickety boats and policing mainland Europe from poverty stricken African migrants. The cost of policing Mediterranean Sea from hungry Nigerian migrants is enormous. However it would be more realistic tackling the upsurge of migrants from its source. EU leaders should change their style of trying to protect their paradise from African migrants. They have the ingenuity to replicate the European technological transformation in African without losing their edge in world leadership. Africa is a virgin land where they could establish many of their factories and help stem the tide of migration to Europe. Globalization and free trade would make meaning to the average Nigerian if he is accepted as a member of the global community. Shading of crocodile tears after the loss of African migrants struggling to cross the perilous Mediterranean Sea off Spanish and Italian costal lines would not solve the problem. We are of the opinion that the EU can afford the cost of constructing an underground train linking Europe with sub-Saharan African countries. Europe is like an umbilical cord to Africa. Europeans should take pride in developing Africa.

African population is growing at an astronomical rate because of illiteracy and poverty while the European population is in decline due to technological advancement and high life-expectancy. These young migrants should not be denied access to Europe and other developed parts of the world as they can be useful if properly

engaged. Europe in the Middle Ages faced population crisis which the discoveries of other parts of the world helped to alleviate. According to Siegfried Hagl (2012:14):

Europe with its growing population would have suffered a series of deep economic crises, had it not been for the discoveries of the great navigators.

Sub-Saharan African is passing through political and economic crises. Her people are malnourished, blighted and in dire need of succor. But they do not need self-pity but opportunities to better their lot.

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