

# **Lessons from the worst moments of African immigrants in Europe and North America**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The latter half of the twentieth century saw the emergence of a new trend among Africans on the continent – an elevated exodus of Africans to Western Europe, but also to North America and the Gulf States. In this work, analyses of the worst moments from over 50 testimonies of immigrants (students, professionals, and asylum seekers in their quests for a dream life in the West) are presented. The present analyses intimate possible avenues for mitigating these worst moments, curbing African brain drain, and fostering sustainable development on the African continent.

**Keywords/key phrases:** African brain drain, African Diaspora, Exodus from Africa, Worst moments of Africans abroad, immigrants, sustainable development.

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## Introduction

The latter half of the twentieth century saw the emergence of a new trend among Africans on the continent – an elevated exodus of Africans to Western Europe, but also to North America and the Gulf States.<sup>3</sup> African immigration to the United States, for example, doubled between the decades of the 1980s and 1990s (see table 1). According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), Africa has already lost one third of its human capital and is continuing to lose its skilled personnel at an increasing rate, with an estimated 20,000 doctors, university lecturers, engineers and other professionals leaving the continent annually since 1990.<sup>4</sup> This excludes the large number of undocumented emigrants from Africa. In Cameroon and Ghana, where the potential to emigrate is demonstrably very high,<sup>5</sup> new words such as *Bush-faller*<sup>6</sup> and *Burger*, respectively, have been coined to describe someone who emigrates to the West. Apparently, becoming a *Bush-faller* or *Burger* is very much en vogue in Africa.

As Akyeampong observes, the elevated exodus from Africa has led to the evolution of the African Diaspora, and culminated in the birth of a unique African who straddles continents, worlds and cultures in the *new African Diaspora*.<sup>7</sup> Many scholars agree that this unique African is very important yet badly understudied. His/her potential can be harnessed to reverse the effects of brain drain precipitated by the currently elevated migratory streams from Africa. Research and studies of this neo African

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<sup>3</sup> Economic commission for Africa, International Migration and Development implications for Africa, 2006, Available at <http://www.uneca.org>

<sup>4</sup> Charles Gathua, "Brain Drain in Sub-Saharan Africa," *Beninda Solutions* (September 2003): 1, available at [www.africasbraingain.org](http://www.africasbraingain.org); David Johnson, "Africa's Brain Drain Slows Development," *Africana*, 2 March 2000, available at [www.africana.com](http://www.africana.com).

<sup>5</sup> European commission report, Push and pull factors of international migration, a comparative report, European communities, 2000.

<sup>6</sup> The word *Bush-faller* comes from the fact that when an African goes to the 'bush', he/she brings back something good: a man would bring back game from his hunt and a woman food!

<sup>7</sup> Akyeampong E. 2000. *Africans in the Diaspora: The Diaspora and Africa*, African Affairs 99, 183-215.

emigration and the neo-Diaspora migrant life experience would greatly enhance the development of policies in the broad field of migration, development, and integration.

**Table 1: African Immigrants to the United States by Country of Birth (thousands) 1981-2000**

Country of Birth	1981-90	1991-2000
Nigeria	35.3	67.3
Ethiopia	27.2	49.3
Egypt	31.4	46.7
Ghana	14.9	35.6
South Africa	15.7	22.8
All other African countries	192.3	383.0

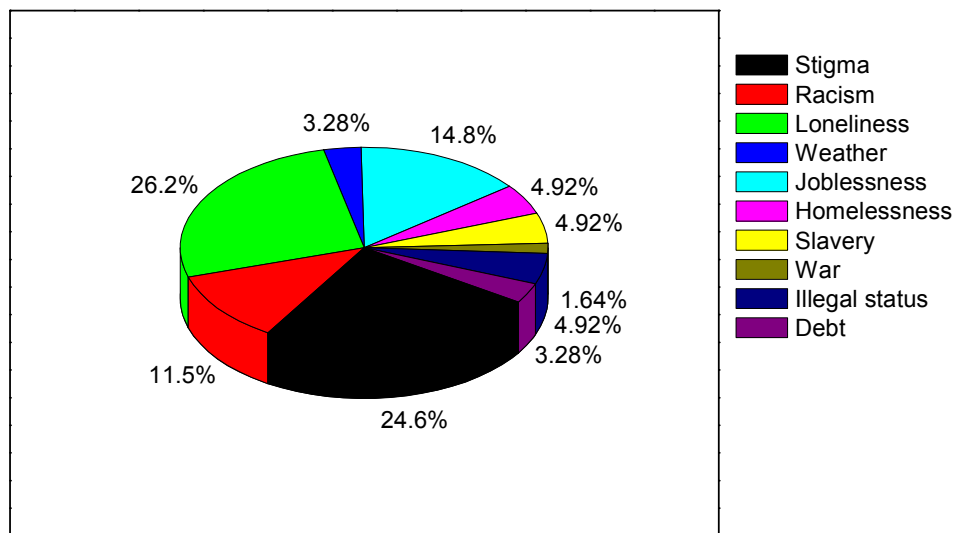
*Source: US Census Bureau. Statistical Abstract of the United States (Washington, DC: US Census Bureau, 2003)*

The above figures provide the motivation for this work. In collecting the experiences for this study, 50 Africans in Europe and the United States were interviewed. Interviewees were asked to describe the following: reasons for travel, preparation, departure, arrival, culture shock, comic moments, hardships, failures and triumphs (worst moments and best moments) – if any, comparison between expectations prior to travel and realities abroad, advantages and disadvantages of living in Africa and living in the West, and recommendations for those planning to travel abroad. Examining the common responses to these questions would help illuminate the reasons for leaving Africa, patterns of economic and educational adaptation abroad, changes in gender and generational roles, issues of cultural and political identity, the impact of international

immigration policies etc.<sup>8</sup> In this paper we will focus on the worst moments of the interviewees. We will discuss the significance of the worst moments, ways to alleviate them, and use the analyses to propose possible solutions to African Brain Drain and the promotion of sustainable development in Africa.

### Worst moments and Analyses

Figure 2 depicts the worst moments of African immigrant experiences in Europe and North America extracted from the interviewee experiences.



**Figure 2:** Pie Chart showing the distribution of worst moments of African immigrants in Europe and North America

As the chart clearly indicates, worst moments include stigma and negative stereotypes, racism or prejudice, loneliness or acute homesickness, weather, joblessness, homelessness, slavery, war, illegal status, and debt or the lack of (credit cards). Other

<sup>8</sup> For further details of most of over 40 of these experiences, see Lydia A. Ngwa and Wilfred Ngwa eds., *From Dust to Snow: The African Dream?* (Morrisville, North Carolina: Lulu, 2006).

significant implicit or illative worst moments include deportation procedures, death, and ignorance. We will discuss each of these and the significance of its distribution on the pie chart, possible cross-correlation, peculiarity, and ways by which these immigrants overcame these worst moments.

Evidently, loneliness seems to be the most common worst moment. The experiences showed, understandably, that loneliness correlates strongly with homesickness especially not long after arrival of immigrants. One of the interviewees expressed how in England, she would wake up in the middle of the night crying simply because she was homesick. Another in Germany was so lonely he composed a poem on loneliness during the lonely moments. Loneliness and homesickness was independent of classification (student, professionals, asylum seekers), but it was less an effect for professionals who usually travel with their families e.g. US DV lottery winners or skilled workers in Canada.

In general feelings of loneliness occur to all of us - sometimes we are thrown into that sense of uniqueness and the awareness that no one can ever fully know and understand us. However this is patently aggravated for an African coming from a communal life style in Africa, who suddenly finds him/herself alone having to deal with stressful situations and further driven by the other worst moments. The danger is when loneliness can bring on feelings of despair and depression that indicate a need to get help. What can you do? Most interviewees overcame this either by patience or connecting with others, and contact with Home Life. If we may add, of course if the feelings persist, seeing a counsellor may help you find a new perspective and enable you to find your own resources to cope. From the analyses, the United States was apparently more culturally

friendly with a bigger African new Diaspora population. This together with the higher working hours helped to alleviate loneliness.

Stigma and negative stereotypes appeared almost in every migrant experience, irrespective of classification, and irrespective of geographical location. Over 95 % of stigma and negative stereotypes came as a result of skin-colour correlated to the negative stereotypes about Africa, enhanced by the unbalanced reporting from the media. It was interesting to see remarkably similar experiences from students in Europe and the US. Africans complain that they always have to prove themselves and are considered 'backward' otherwise. Negative stereotypes about a group can be very destructive and stressful for stigmatized people, because their performance in stereotype-related domains (e.g. education) may be compromised by concerns about confirming the negative stereotypes. This happens even if they themselves do not actually believe that the stereotypes are accurate.<sup>9</sup> Immigrants overcame stigma and negative stereotyping either by information or sensitization, patience and tolerance or by positive performance (proving themselves), sometimes usually to the visible surprise of some Westerners.

Racism is a huge factor that has correlated with numerous deaths of Africans abroad. Though it was cited fewer than the other problems like loneliness, racism may be responsible for the worst 'worst moments' of Africans abroad independent of social classification. However, multicultural countries are expected to have lesser incidences as expected. In response to racism, most African immigrants group together very much like the mutants in the X-men movies, as if coming together to fight a common threat. In one case, one of the interviewees tells how an African would see another across the street and would do everything to greet him/her just because his skin is black.

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<sup>9</sup> Steele, C. M. and Aronson, J. (Nov 1995). Stereotype threat and the intellectual test performance of African Americans. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 69 (5): 797-811.

Some immigrants suffered from the weather, partly due to poor preparation or homelessness or lack of money for appropriate clothing or heating. Homelessness was particularly a problem for asylum seekers, and correlated strongly with lack of money and illegal status. Many immigrants solved the homeless problem by sharing living in squats, abandoned houses and cars, train stations etc.

Most immigrants arrive Europe and North America expecting they would land jobs the ‘following day.’ However they have to struggle with: poor resumes or CVs, the need to translate credentials, prejudice by employers, and other issues related to their background. The waiting and searching period is really a difficult moment for the average African in the new Diaspora. It even engenders other worst moments, compounded by the fact that the immigrant’s family back in the sending country is waiting for the immigrant to remit money to them. Finally they get the jobs – largely, the types of jobs that *Bush-fallers* do in the first instance are summed up in the 3-Ds, namely: dirty, difficult and dangerous tasks available and accessible in the receiving communities. In other words, low valued and unstable tasks are constructed for immigrant workers who are often too focussed on survival to be choosy and preoccupied with security and career paths for a start. The migrants experience a tacit form of discrimination, which is usually in the form of “equal pay for equal work, but unequal work.”<sup>10</sup> In addition to working for desperately low pay, their health is often affected eventually.

In fact some of the interviewees said how they had to slave hard in mean jobs for more than twenty hours a day to secure the finances for subsistence and sending home or for the return home. (It is not surprising that the most cited best moments were when

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<sup>10</sup> See Muller, T. 1997. “Migration, dual labour markets and social welfare in a small open economy”, Cahier 97-13 du Centre de Recherche en Economie et Finance Appliquées, CREFA; Hammar, T. 1985. *European Immigration Policy: A Comparative Study*. Cambridge, University Press, Cambridge.

money was sent home or the immigrant visited home.) Some immigrants compared their situations to slavery. In fact some pundits agree that sometime in the future, history will look back at the difficult experiences of Africans in the neo-diaspora as some form of slavery. Some asylum seekers are coerced to do really mean jobs in order to survive. Some resort to crime like drugs or shop-lifting, which further enhances the negative stereotypes or stigma, which in turn makes it more difficult to award jobs to immigrants. So, some of the worst moments constitute a self-perpetuating negative cycle. Such moments can be eschewed by better and informed decisions and preparation about the travel abroad process

Interestingly the war in Baghdad was cited as a worst moment by two African immigrants who fought in the war. One described how fellow Nigerians lost their lives, and how he almost lost his. This is however not a usual situation. Another less cited worst moment was the issue of credit cards. This is especially worse for Africans arriving in the US who are not used to the concept. Buying on credit has become synonymous with the "American way of life". In almost every financial transaction, they want to check one's credit history or report, and since the new immigrant does not have such a history, they immediately fall into a bad situation. This is one thing many immigrants need to adjust to, especially, coming from Africa where the concept of credit history is still a foreign thing. Help is needed here, at least in the form of advice on what to do. One way to deal with this problem is to get a secured credit card, where you pay in some amount initially into the credit card account. Immigrants then use this to build a credit history. Another way is to get a co-signer but this is usually difficult as you have to really trust the person.

Some of the most difficult moments for immigrants are when they lose a close relative, but cannot even travel back to Africa to pay their last respects, due to lack of finances, job issues or other. In some African societies this may even result in great problems, curses and so forth. This is a common problem no matter the geographical location and class of immigrants as long as they cannot travel home. Even worse is having to transport the corpse of a family member from abroad back to Africa for burial. This demands a lot of money. Most Africans belonging to Diaspora groups or other organizations like church families could get support for assuaging such worst moments.

Deportation as a worst moment is peculiar to illegal immigrants and particularly asylum seekers who fail to secure residency. Forced by circumstances beyond their control to seek a life outside their home countries, prevented from entering legally and from working, denied a fair hearing by the asylum system, excluded from health and safety protection at work, kept from social care and welfare, vilified by the media and therefore dehumanised in popular imagination, the hopes and dreams of African asylum-seekers for another life are finally extinguished. Cases of death during forced deportations continue to abound. Such worst moments can only be alleviated through information and better preparedness for potential African migrants.

### **Lessons from the worst moments**

The above is by no means an exhaustive list or treatment of the worst moments of Africans abroad and their solutions. We mainly want to focus on a couple of cross-cutting lessons that may avail immigration and economic policies from the most cited worst moments. First, from the study, it was observed that the worst moments coerce

Africans to want to group together. The worst moments engender solidarity and the need for Africans abroad to come together or mobilize and help new *Bush-fallers*. The worst moments show that the *Bush-faller* needs a good social and community network. He/She needs people who are ready and willing to aid along the way: a church, international student services, cultural or Diaspora group, etc. This would assuage the most common worst moments: loneliness, stigma, racism – helping to enhance integration, promote tolerance and understanding, and allow Westerners to learn more about Africa and her positives.

Furthermore, being involved with Diaspora groups avails mobilization, and makes it possible to be involved in common sustainable development projects, which are usually not possible with individual ('lonely') remittances to family members alone. 'Lonely' contributions mostly only succeed in 'providing fish' rather than 'teaching how to fish.' It is well known that contributions of Africans in Diaspora are consequential for the African Renaissance, as evident in the 2006 African Renaissance conference Salvador Declaration.<sup>11</sup> If African Diaspora groups are supported to better provide the community network to plug-in new *Bush-fallers*, this would in turn leverage the potential to contribute, as a group, to sustainable development (SD) in Africa. One way would be to support the creation and enhancement of Diaspora networks, common platforms and policy incentives to facilitate their SD projects. In fact empowering Diaspora groups to support productive and transformative SD projects could be pivotal in improving the socio-economic conditions in Africa and arresting the brain drain, which in turn improves the economic situation – engendering a self perpetuating positive cycle.

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<sup>11</sup> Asante, M. 2006. *African Renaissance Conferences of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Dakar and Salvador in Perspective*, Journal of Black Studies, 37, 169-176.

It is seen from the study that other worst moments can be alleviated through information: sensitization and greater preparedness of Africans before they travel abroad. Such sensitization should include information on the real life experiences of Africans abroad. It is possible that if potential immigrants are well sensitized on the realities of life in the new Diaspora, some may actually reconsider travelling abroad, reducing brain drain. This is especially so because warped perceptions of receiving countries often gotten from the media may contribute significantly in determining migration. Receiving countries also need to be sensitized about the positives of Africa and a more balance picture of Africa. This will enable westerners to be able to understand and appreciate the African in their midst, nurturing better global citizenship in today's global village. The impact of such sensitization campaigns need to be studied as well as the impact of supporting Diaspora groups and appropriate organizations in integrating immigrants as a precursor to harnessing their support for fostering sustainable development in Africa.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, to dream to be a successful African away from "home" is fast becoming an accepted price to pay in order to achieve dreams born from circumstances back on the African continent or pull factors in the receiving countries. This study highlights the worst moments or price Africans have to pay abroad in the new Diaspora. From the analyses we proposed two possible solutions for mitigating the worst moments: information and enhancing the creation and support of support 'communities'. Both of these engender spin-offs as potential avenues for curbing brain drain and fostering sustainable development in Africa. It is our hope that this study would incite more

research and studies on the life of the African in the new Diaspora as this would benefit migration policy with relevance in many areas including integration, security, and development.

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