

IMPACT OF INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION ON NIGERIA-UNITED STATES RELATIONS

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the impact of international migration on Nigeria–United States relations. The aim of the research is to critically examine how the costs and benefits of migration flows between Nigeria and the United States influence the nature and dynamics of their bilateral relations within the period under review. The study adopts a qualitative research methodology, relying on the analysis of secondary data drawn from government reports, migration statistics, policy documents, scholarly publications, and diplomatic communications. A descriptive and analytical approach is used to assess evolving migration patterns, policy responses, and their implications for diplomatic engagement between the two countries. The findings reveal that increasing out-migration of highly skilled Nigerians has generated significant concern for the Nigerian government due to its impact on national development, while the United States’ position as a major destination has led to stricter immigration regulations, surveillance, and deportation measures. These responses, although aimed at migration control, have occasionally strained diplomatic relations. At the same time, remittances and diaspora contributions continue to strengthen economic and social ties, demonstrating a complex interplay of costs and benefits that both challenge and sustain bilateral relations. The study concludes that international migration has become a critical yet under-examined factor in Nigeria–United States relations, influencing both cooperation and tension. It recommends the adoption of coordinated bilateral frameworks, improved domestic conditions in Nigeria to curb forced migration, and humane, transparent immigration policies in the United States to foster mutual understanding and strengthen diplomatic relations.

KEYWORDS: migration, relations, Nigeria, United States, intersection, cost, benefits

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the impact of international migration on Nigeria and the United States with a view to determining their role in the nature of the two countries’ bilateral relations. International migration, popularly referred to in Nigeria local parlance as *japa* due to its rampant nature in recent times, remained ever-growing as demonstrated in the previous chapter. While the Nigerian government campaigned against the *japa* syndrome which had seen exodus of highly skilled professionals, the United States which received more Nigerians

than the number of her nationals who migrated to settle in Nigeria had equally taken some radical steps against it, sometimes through deportation. The struggle by both countries' authorities to halt further large migration from Nigeria, as well as other non-European countries, that on some occasions led to tensions in their relations remained on top gear even at the time of writing.

Several studies have attempted to look into the pros and cons of migration on home and destination countries. But most these studies overlooked the ultimate implications of the cost and benefits associated with migration between Nigeria and the United States for their bilateral relations within the period under review. Understanding how the costs and benefits interact with the nature of Nigeria and the United States bilateral relations is imperative to formulating appropriate policies on both sides for better management of migration patterns. This calls for a critical assessment of the costs and benefits of migration patterns beyond the usual realm of socio-economic development of Nigeria and the United States which most of the available literature are concerned with.

BRAIN-DRAIN AND FAMILY SEPARATION

Brain drain implies the migration of a great number of highly skilled and educated people from one country to another.¹ It constituted a great policy issue in countries like Nigeria, since it entails the movement of human capital, one of the scarcest resources and a major driver of economic growth and poverty alleviation. Patterns of movement between Nigeria and the United States since 1970 involved the migration of a great number of educated and highly skilled young able bodied Nigerians at working age, who should constitute critical part of the Nigerian labour force. On the other hand, the migration of American professionals to Nigeria has been limited, with concentration in the multinational oil companies and diplomatic community. Thus, the Nigerian young able bodied skilled professionals contributed to healthcare, socio-economic development and technological advancement of the United States without complementary numbers of Americans contributing to Nigerian economy. Technological advancement and the health sector has suffered shortage of manpower as a result of the migratory trend. Specifically the emigration of doctors and nurses resulted in the inability of several hospitals to render adequate care to patients. Nigeria had a doctor-to-patient ratio of 1:2500, which was far below the suggested ratio of 1:600. It has been argued that the understaffing contributed to increased mortality rates, even in cases of curable and preventable conditions.² It was reported in 2021 that more than 80% of the doctors who graduated from Nigerian medical schools between 2011 and 2021 migrated overseas.³

The Nigerian educational system, according to Olubiyi and Olarinde, lacked the capacity to replace the highly skilled labour force that was emigrating in quick succession.⁴ The educational institutions were not only being overstrained by the large number of professionals from other sectors but members of academia who should contribute to training new professionals were also on the move. In this connection, David Osadolor observes that “the loss of educators and researchers has diminished the quality of education in Nigeria, with many universities struggling to maintain academic standards.”⁵ The development led to a vicious cycle because as the quality of education declined more students and academics were driven to look for better options overseas, further aggravating the brain drain.⁶ A case in point is that of Professor Olufunmilayo Olopade. She was a famous Nigerian-born oncologist and geneticist, who left for the U.S. in 1983 to begin her internship and residency in Chicago, after completing her medical training in Nigeria. In the United States, she became a foremost researcher in cancer genetics and personalised medicine. Her contributions made essential impact on cure of breast cancer, especially in women of African origin. Her feats in the

United States health sector and academia were no doubt source pride to Nigeria, but at the same time her migration away from the country deprived medical students in Nigeria of her expertise and ingenuity. Nigerian women who suffered cancer did not also benefit from access to one of their own to treatment.⁷ Other notable instance was Benneth Omalu, who moved from Nigeria to the United States in 1994, beginning with an epidemiology fellowship at the University of Washington in Seattle. He became a US citizen in 2015. A neuropathologist and forensic pathologist, he discovered and published findings in 2005 on Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE) in American football players during his engagement at the Allegheny County coroner's office in Pittsburgh. He was to become the chief medical examiner for San Joaquin County, California, and a professor in department of medical pathology and laboratory medicine at the University of California.⁸

Since 1970 there has been debate on the subject of brain drain which explored the costs of human capital transfer from Third World countries like Nigeria to the Global North. The arguments stress that brain drain help to perpetuate existing inequality between the Global South and Global North. Migration of the best brains and able bodied, apart from disrupting development in Nigeria where they were trained or which contributed to their training abroad through scholarship, deprived their country of much needed taxes they ought to had pay to the country were they working in Nigeria. At the same time, huge sums and other resources were committed to sponsor training of such professionals in the hope that they would be useful in the development of the nation.⁹ It is also argued that the presence of such Nigerian immigrants professionals in Nigeria would also have contributed to market expansion as they would have spent their earnings in Nigeria. Thus, it is held that Nigeria was denied a chance to develop a robust and dynamic technology industry that could attract foreign direct investment, create employment, and drive economic diversification due to the exodus of talented Nigerian engineers and tech entrepreneurs and to the United States.

Another cost of brain drain was the vacuum in leadership it created in some communities. This was a development that weakened the social fabric and undermined efforts to proffer solution to local challenges. In the domain of the arts, many prominent figures like Biodun Jeyifo, Prof. Chinua Achebe, Prof. Wole Soyinka left Nigeria in the late 1980s and 1990s; and others such as Saheed Aderinto, Abimbola Adelokun, Prof. Hauwa Ibrahim who left later in the 2000s. Thus, universities and other cultural institutions lost many of their brightest stars. Indeed, as most of them migrated to the US, the country was denied the diversity of voices that could have contributed to national discourse.¹⁰

Nevertheless, scholars are yet to come to agreement on the actual magnitude of the brain drain in home countries. It is pertinent to say that not all highly skilled persons migrating out in most cases would have been employed by the Nigerian labour market.¹¹ Another aspect of the emigration of the skilled professionals is what scholars had referred to as brain waste. Brain waste is the engagement of high skilled Nigerians immigrants in sectors other than the one they had trained for. Cases of several Nigerian immigrant doctors, priests and scientists working in the United States in cities like Texas, Michigan, Chicago and New York as taxi drivers illustrate the brain waste syndrome.¹²

Nigerian migration patterns equally impacted negatively on family stability and cohesion. Family is the nucleus of every society. Family stability refers to the ability of a given family to maintain resilience, cohesion and functionality in the face of exogenous challenges. Family stability provided socialisation, emotional support, and economic security for its members. In Nigeria, emphasis is placed on interdependence and kinship ties, as well as mutual support. A stable family structure contributed to educational attainment of children, increased economic productivity and enhanced healthcare for its members.¹³ However disruption to the family structure and stability occurred as result of the migration of the breadwinner or primary caregiver. Family separation either parents or of children led to

psychosocial challenges and increased the vulnerability of those left behind. In most cases the elderly were left behind without care even though they might be in need of care. Such family disruption imposed a cost on society generally as lack of proper parental care could expose the children to a life of crime. In several cases, women had to bear the brunt of the burden. Children who migrated felt more attached to the host country more than their parents.¹⁴

A study carried out in Ikwo Local Government Area of Ebonyi State, Nigeria reveals that migration of heads of households caused communication break-down and disruption in families. Absence of the breadwinner also led to increased emotional distress, and lack of social support for the family.¹⁵ Adepoju remarks that the migration of breadwinners could result in stress and possible abandonment of children's education.¹⁶ A study by the United Nations Global Migration Group reveals that migration of a key family member can expose family members to trafficking, exploitation and poor living condition and could result in destabilizing the family life. Moreover, when the head of household migrated, the burden of childcare, domestic work and decision-making often fell on the remaining family members, typically women and children. In the event of migration of fathers the children grew up without everyday guidance from their fathers which in turn affected development and relationship among family members. Ultimately prolonged separation through migration of one of the spouses could lead to break-up in marriage.¹⁷ However, family members had resorted to innovative means to keep together and maintained relationship even when separated across borders. This included in the 21st video calls.

In addition, exploitation and human rights abuses against Nigerians in the U.S. were not ruled out. In the Trafficking in Persons Protocol, exploitation is conceived as harsh and abusive conditions of labour or work conditions that are inconsistent with human dignity.¹⁸ Irregular immigrants were extremely prone to discrimination, marginalization and exploitation. In most cases they lived and worked in hiding, denied human rights and fundamental freedoms and, because of their illegal status, were afraid to complain. Immigrants' rights abuse include deprivation of political and civil rights—arbitrary detention, lack of due process, torture—and denial of socio-cultural rights, like right to education and housing.¹⁹ In 2010 for example, Emmanuel Nnaji, a naturalised citizen and his wife, Ngozi Ihechere Nnaji who was Nigerian living in the US were found guilty of subjecting an irregular Nigerian immigrant to forced domestic labour, document servitude, conspiracy to harbour a foreigner and harbouring foreigner for financial gain for over eight years and were sentenced by US District Court. The victim, who was a widowed mother of six children, alongside her chronically ill child, was recruited in Nigeria with promises that her children would be cared for in return for her work in the United States for the Nnajis. But once the victim got to the US, the couple seized her passport and forced her to work for them night and day. The victim faced a series of domestic and right abuses including sexual assault by Nnaji Emmanuel until she was rescued with the help of a Catholic priest.²⁰

In another landmark case involving Nigerian immigrants in the US, a Nigerian woman was discovered to be a victim of labour trafficking. She was rescued on 10th October, 2015 after over two years of enslavement by the couple, Sandra Nsobundu and Chudy Nsobundu in the US. The couple took the victim from Nigeria to the United States to care for their children. While in the US, her movement was restricted, and was not paid N20000 stipend earlier promised her. She was compelled to sleep on the floor as her bed. The ruling on the case by American officials imposed a restitution of \$121,046.91 on the erring couple.

It be stressed that remittances sent to Nigeria equally face challenges. They had contributed to weakening productivity and growth in Nigeria since they were readily spent on consumption often dominated by foreign goods than on productive investments. It should be noted that good migration policies leading to remittances flows, contributed to strengthening United States and Nigeria economic exchanges and encouraged the development of bilateral

collaborations. A study, “The Effect of Remittances on Economic Growth of Nigeria” carried out by Eberechi Bernadine Ikwuagwu et al. in 2024, finds that remittances have a negative and significant effect on Nigeria’s economic growth in both long-run and short-run.²¹

ECONOMIC BENEFITS OF MIGRATION BETWEEN NIGERIA AND THE UNITED STATES

One of the benefits of the large-scale migration of Nigerians to the United States has been *remittance*. It is often used in its plural form—remittances. Remittance, according to the International Monetary Fund, is the sending by migrants of part of their incomes in the form of goods or cash to support their families in the home country.²² The Investopedia website also explains that remittance involves the sending of money by a person or group to another country, usually a poorer country.²³ Remittances can be classified into three main types, namely personal, institutional and total remittances. Personal remittance refers to capital transfers made by resident households to resident households; institutional remittances consists of transfers by any residential sector to non-resident households and non-profits organisations; and total remittance is a combination of the above two types. Remittances have been on the increase for a good number of years and represent the largest source of external earning for several Third World countries, including Nigeria.²⁴

The World Bank reveals that in the year 2000, documented remittances to Nigeria reached \$1,392 billion. In the following year, the Nigeria Diaspora sent \$1,167 billion, while in 2002 \$1,209 was sent in remittances to Nigeria. In 2017, Nigeria received \$22 billion, which was higher than the \$13.4 billion from oil exports in the same year. Also while the Nigeria Diaspora sent home \$25.1 billion within four years, according to Central Bank of Nigeria economic reports, total oil revenue was \$18 billion in 2018. Nigeria’s total yearly revenue in 2018 was \$18.2 billion, while Nigerian immigrants abroad sent home a total of \$24.311 billion in the same year. Nigerian immigrants in the United States alone sent home \$7.2bn in 2018, which was higher than the total \$6.7 billion allocated for capital spending the following year.²⁵ Available records reveal that Nigeria received remittances increased from \$22 million in 1980 to over \$20 billion in 2022.²⁶ These data indicate that while migration of Nigerian experts abroad denied it of their taxes and services, the phenomenon has counterbalanced by remittances, which, as we have seen, sometimes dwarfs the total revenue generated by the country from other sources.

Remittances, according to P. A. Imouokhome, were major source of savings and capital for investments in health, education, and entrepreneurship, thereby enhancing productivity and employment, leading in turn to economic growth and poverty reduction. Remittances has also aided financial sector growth, as some of them are converted and deposited with banks, thus making the funds available for lending to the private sector. To a great extent, remittances provide support for the welfare of the relatives left behind by migrants, as such contributing to the eradication of poverty in the country where they were sent.²⁷ The value of the naira usually improves during the Christmas season as more Nigerians come home with foreign currency. Former Nigeria Vice President once said that, “70 per cent of the diaspora inflows that come into Nigeria...goes into family support and only 30 per cent of the inflows go towards investments.”²⁸ Conversely, it can be argued that if the large number of migrants abroad, in places like the United States living and contributing their ingenuity to the foreign economy, were rendering their services in Nigeria, the country’s financial earnings would still have been more than what it got and overshadowed what was received in remittances over the years.

The remittance received by Nigeria from the United States since 1970, but especially from the 1980s, have been a significant source of foreign exchange for Nigeria and

contributed to poverty alleviation and economic expansion in the country. Remittances have improved the consumption level of rural families. During the period of this study, it raised the allocation of capital, replace lack of financial development and as such accelerate economic growth.²⁹ A study carried out by Ajayi E. Olusuyi *et al* lends credence to the above as it shows that remittance flows to Nigeria between 1971 and 2013 had a significant effect on economic growth of Nigeria.³⁰ Another study conducted by Ugochukwu Remigius Ihezue *et al.* concludes that migration has inconsequential outcome on economic growth, while remittance had positive and substantial impact on economic growth in Nigeria.³¹ Besides, remittance flows help to increase the real exchange rate in recipient economies such as Nigeria and hence generate a resource allocation from the tradable to the non-tradable sector.

The literature on remittance appear not to have given much attention to Americans remittance from Nigeria to the United States as they dwell largely on remittances to low income countries. Nonetheless, capital repatriation from Nigeria by U.S. expatriates working in Nigeria was also a significant source of American foreign exchange earnings. From the early 1970s through the 1980s, American expatriates were attracted to Nigeria particularly due to the oil boom of the era. Most of these workers were engaged by multinational oil companies, like Chevron, Texaco and Shell, which were operating in Nigeria. Most of the American expatriates—oil engineers, aid workers, educators, and business consultants—routinely remitted part of their earnings to the United States for tax, savings, and investment or to support families. This capital flow was often included in corporate salary structures that gave room for repatriation of foreign earnings to the United States banks. However, Available records show that the US was second among the top countries that received remittances in form of personal transfers from Nigeria between 2016 and 2021. In 2016 alone the US received a total of \$206,187,265.38 and \$13,370,297.37 in 2021.³²

In like manner, American multinationals operating in Nigeria repatriated large revenues, technically classified under income on investment instead of personal remittances. These remittances supported college tuition, retirement funds and mortgage payments in the U.S. . Americans were mandated to report their global income to the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) even when working overseas. The U.S. Foreign Account Tax Compliance Act (FATCA) of 2010 extended oversight of overseas financial flows and required reporting of overseas-held assets. Hence, earnings sent from Nigeria were integrated into the U.S. tax base as from 2010. Also worthy of note is that records of American expatriates remittances to the U.S. are not readily available because such transfers often occurred within corporate channels. Salary payments or profits repatriation, personal bank transfers not tracked as remittances in standard datasets.³³ What one is trying to point out here is that there were mutual monetary benefits for Nigeria and the United States from reciprocal migration of their citizens. While the Nigerians in American are commonly called immigrants, their American equivalent in Nigeria are called expatriates. In the same way, the money repatriated home by American expatriates working in Nigeria are not tracked as remittances which is the term used to describe the capital sent from advanced economy to poor economies. This imbalance in scholarly representation of international migration continues to perpetuate the perception of immigration as an anomaly associated with mainly economic disadvantages of Third World countries.

Another important benefits associated with Nigerian migration to the United States was contribution to the expansion of American markets. The contribution is intertwined with the demographic characteristic, entrepreneurial activity, professional distribution and transnational economic engagement of Nigerian immigrants. Nigerian had one of the largest immigrant groups in the United States, and as a result played a dynamic role in impacting the economic and commercial landscape of America, especially in education-intensive sectors, digital economies, small and medium-scale business development and international trade.³⁴

There are many Nigerian entrepreneurs in cities like Houston, Dallas, and Atlanta, where they operate businesses in retail, logistics, food services, fashion, and Afro-centric cultural products. Nigerian restaurants, music festivals, and clothing boutiques have become not only cultural symbols but also economically viable enterprises.³⁵ For instance, the West African food scene in Houston has gained national attention for its scale and market penetration, driven largely by Nigerian immigrant businesses.³⁶ Another example is Iya Foods, which specializes in African food products and successfully penetrated into mainstream U.S. retail chains through diaspora-driven networks and market adaptability. The earnings and purchasing power of Nigerian households in the U.S. directly impacted the U.S. domestic consumer industries. In 2018, they paid an estimated amount of \$2.7 billion in federal income taxes, and about \$1.4 billion in state and local taxes.³⁷ Moreover, Nigerian immigrants in the United States acted as transnational economic factors which connected U.S. businesses with emerging opportunities in Nigeria and West Africa. Bilateral trade between the United States and Nigeria in 2024 was about \$11.3 billion.³⁸

EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND TECHNOLOGICAL TRANSFER

Migration of Nigerians to the United States gave them opportunity to access world-class education. It culminated in building a transnational community of highly educated Nigerians with global competencies.³⁹ According to Akin Ibidapo-Obe and Peter Adeyemi the migrants acted as “carriers of technology,” and brought home to them new practices, technical skills, and professional standards that contribute to national capacity building.⁴⁰ While the Nigerian migrants gained from the U.S. world-class educational system, the U.S. equally benefited as the Nigerian student filled admission gaps and participated in faculty development including teaching roles, especially in community colleges and minority serving institutions. For those who paid tuition fees, those tuition fees contributed to the revenue of their institutions. They equally contributed to diversity in academic discourse introducing African epistemologies and post-colonial perspectives that enhanced curricula in disciplines such as history, political science and literature. In 2022, the U.S. department of Homeland Security’s SEVIS database listed more than 1400 Nigerian students studying in the United States.

Nigerian educated in the United States who returned to the country contributed to socio-economic development and political culture of the country. In the 1970s and early 1980s, Nigerians that studied in the US returned to seek employment in Nigeria. At the time, the Nigerian economy was booming, and the value of the naira was higher than that of the dollar. This stopped in the second half of the 1980s, basically because the Nigerian economy declined rather precipitously.⁴¹ These U.S.-educated Nigerians came back with technical skills, professional networks and entrepreneurial know-how as Nigeria began to diversify and modernize its economy in the 20th century. Diaspora academics and technocrats were reintegrated into local universities and research institutions to impart expertise in ICT, medicine and engineering through programmes like the UNDP’s Transfer of Knowledge and expatriate Nationals scheme as well as the “Linkages with Experts and Academics in Diaspora.” In 1977, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) established the Transfer of Knowledge through Expatriate Nationals (TOKTEN) to assist highly skilled expatriates of Nigerian descent to come back to Nigeria for visits between three weeks and three months. The attracted expatriates through the programme invested their expertise in a good number of developmental projects or participated in teaching assignments at local universities.⁴²

The UNDP released \$1 million USD to take of participants’ mobility and living expenses in the course of the programme. The TOKTEN scheme attracted about 900 Nigerian diaspora professionals including those living in the United States. In 2001, the Directorate of

Technical Cooperation in Africa (DTCA) was established to attract professionals of Nigerian origin to contribute their knowledge, skills and expertise to African economies. The National Universities Commission (NUC) established in 2007 Linkages with Experts and Academics in Diaspora Scheme (LEADS) with the main goal of bringing experts and academics of Nigerian origin overseas on a short-term teaching appointments. They were to be offered the incentives in monetary form and return economy class air ticket, accommodation and local transportation costs incurred in the course of the programme. Thirty Nigerian migrants in the U.S. were attracted by the LEADS. They worked in different Nigerian Universities which included until 2017 when the programme ended. The scheme has been acknowledged for its contribution to transforming brain-drain to brain-gain; encouraging industry experts to participate in teaching, research and cross-fertilisation of ideas in Nigerian universities; improving skills acquisition in areas like installation of digital X-ray machines for panoramic and cephalometric radiographs in clinics; improving on Nigerian curriculum review process with modern, high tech and new trends in relevant disciplines; and facilitating reintegration of experts into their heritage and community life.⁴³

Moreover, following emergence of information technology in the advent of reliable satellite communications to widespread internet and mobile phone adoption, Nigerians living in other countries including the United States were able to interact with students, colleagues, institutions and family members, across Nigeria through virtual platforms. These engagements took the form of virtual mentorship, tele-education, consultancy and remote participation in board meetings, seminars or political advocacy. In addition, the diaspora professionals occupied influential positions in multinational organisations and global professional networks, which made possible knowledge and capital investments into Nigeria's ICT and start-up ecosystem.⁴⁴

The engagement of Nigerian academics and professionals in diaspora networks that contribute to research collaboration, curriculum development and capacity building in Nigeria universities reveals the reverse flow of knowledge and human capital. Some institutions like the Nigerian Higher Education Foundation and Nigerian diaspora-based Organisation for the Advancement of Nigerians (OAN) are worthy of mention as regard the promotion of institutional mentoring and exchange programmes between Nigerian and U.S.-based universities. These partnerships gave room for innovative pedagogical models and improved academic standards in Nigerian higher education.⁴⁵ The spread of information technology to Nigeria cities was partly driven by returnee migrants who had gained exposure to Silicon Valley models or other high-tech environments in the United States. Partnership established between the University of Ibadan and the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health in areas such as epidemiology and public health was given a boost by scholars with dual affiliations or training experiences in both countries.⁴⁶ In the face of infrastructural and policy limitations, technological diffusion through human mobility continued to impact Nigeria positively. U.S.-educated Nigerians contributed to initiatives such as online learning platforms and health-tech startup in Nigeria.⁴⁷ These advancements in the 21st century are not merely transactional but systemic, influencing governance, service delivery, and the knowledge economy in Nigeria.

LINKAGES BETWEEN NIGERIA-US RELATIONS AND MIGRATION PATTERNS

Migration trends between Nigeria and the United States between 1970 and 2024 did not only have implications for Nigeria political, socio-cultural and political development but also had significant impact on relations between the two countries. In the same vein, migration trends were influenced by issues in the bilateral relations as the United States had cause to impose bans on migration from Nigeria on different occasions, thereby greatly

impacting human mobility across their borders. For instance, in the 1990s, the US imposed targeted travel restrictions on Nigerian officials due to soured relations between the US and Nigeria resulting from undemocratic practices of the then General Sani Abacha regime in Nigeria. Again in 2020, the US imposed travel ban on Nigeria which according to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS), was due to Nigeria's failure to adequately share identity-management and terrorism-related information about its citizens.⁴⁸

The need for strengthening relations between them had also led to deliberate implementation of programmes such as the Fulbright programmes which ultimately led to migration of a certain section of the Nigerian demography to the United States and programmes like the American Peace Corps which brought to Nigeria a certain section of the American demography. The American Peace Corps in Nigeria, despite the problems that rocked it, served as American soft power in Nigeria helping to shape Nigerian perception of the United States. Volunteers who returned to the United States became important agents of intercultural understanding contributing to public discourse and academic discourse on Africa. Some of them eventually emerged as diplomats and scholars involved in Africa-America relations. The Peace Corps programme overall served as American cultural diplomacy that helped to reduce military expenditure by reducing risks of conflicts.⁴⁹

The United States sought to strengthen its influence in Africa using educational diplomacy. As we have seen, that resulted in increased U.S. scholarship opportunities and easing of educational visa requirements for African students, particularly for Nigerian students and citizens. One of such programmes was the African Scholarship of American Universities (ASPAU). That programme supported by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The programme offered hundreds of Nigerians opportunity to study in the United States. This migration in pursuit of education was not borne out of mere individual aspirations. It was an outcome of deliberate bilateral academic cooperation driven by Cold War diplomatic imperatives and politics.⁵⁰

The ASPAU was significant in promoting the positive image of the U.S. in Nigeria and helped to cement relations between Nigeria and the United States. The ASPAU project in addition encouraged direct interaction between Americans and Nigerians in a manner that created enduring relationships and promoted general appreciation of each other's cultures and societies. This was important to the United States because it contributed to countering the influence of the defunct Soviet Union in Africa through the propagation of American values alongside its educational system.⁵¹

The Fulbright programme became a cornerstone of the U.S. cultural diplomacy having a tremendous influence in Nigeria through educational exchange. The Fulbright acted as a framework for selective migration with focus on a given section of the Nigerian society. It was both a diplomatic tool and migratory mechanism that facilitated temporary and sometimes movements of the brightest students, educators and professionals to the United States. The Fulbright programme built a transnational intellectual class aligned with western ideas.⁵² The programme revolved round the nature of Nigeria-U.S. relations. In times of cooperation, the number of Nigerian awardees increased. The participants usually came back to Nigeria to assume influential positions in public service, academia and diplomacy. This was evident in the 1970s through the 1980s when Nigeria constantly remained among the top African countries receiving Fulbright grants.⁵³ Returning beneficiaries of the programme became cultural ambassadors and policy influencers in Nigeria reinforcing pro-American orientations within local institutions. In the same way, during diplomatic tensions between the two nation-states, such as happened during the military regimes in Nigeria, the number of grantees was reduced and there was increased scrutiny.⁵⁴

The Fulbright programme created reciprocal migration flows between Nigeria and the United States. The reverse movement of American Fulbright scholars to Nigeria institutions

built lasting ties among institutions and intellectual networks. More often than not the visiting academics engaged in collaborative research, curriculum development and capacity building initiatives in Nigerian Universities and research institutions. Their activities in Nigeria demonstrated the U.S. soft power while leading to long-term academic exchanges, sabbaticals and occasionally even permanent migration of scholars from Nigeria to the United States.⁵⁵ The Fulbright programme saw the likes of Dr. Joseph Orban, a distinguished professor of Biomedical Sciences at Southern University working for twelve months in Nigeria, between 2018 and 2019. Another awardee of the programme, Regennia N Williams a distinguished scholar in African-American history worked at Obafemi Awolowo University and engaged with Nigerian academics to explore diasporic religious and cultural links. More recently, Stacey Vanderhurst an assistant professor of women gender and sexuality studies at University of Kansas, conducted research and taught at the University of Lagos.⁵⁶

Migration had significant impact on Nigeria socio-cultural relations within the period under review. It promoted the spread of Nigeria culture to the United States, thereby reinforcing Nigeria's cultural diplomatic relations with the United States. The Nigerians who migrated to the U.S. were pivotal in the export of Nigerian culture to the United States. The exported cultural aspects included Afro beats music, Nollywood films, fashion and cuisine, which improved the international image of the country in the United States. As Ayakoroma rightly points out, Nigerians overseas, including those in the United States, acted as cultural ambassadors, propagating values and traditions internationally. They help to promote Nigeria's rich cultural heritage, showcasing its various aspects to the American audience, and in so doing create networks with people from diverse backgrounds to encourage cross-cultural understanding and exchange. Thus, too, they share positive stories and experiences that corrected negative stereotypes and facilitated accurate narratives about the Nigeria. Many Nigerians have been outstanding in these cultural exchanges. They include Nigerian musicians like David Adeleke, Damini Ebunoluwa Ogulu, MFR, Ibrahim Balogun, and Tobi Amunsa; and literary artistes like Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie.⁵⁷

Nigerian migrants contributed to diversity in civic life in the United States. Growing numbers of Nigerians participated in U.S. politics and policymaking, thereby giving voice to Africans and African perspectives within the American public life circle. Their active participation in government in the United States promoted more inclusive and representative democracy in the U.S. while at the same time building a diplomatic wedge between their host country and home country. Nigerian immigrants, either temporary or permanent, contributed in no small measure to promoting Nigeria's interests abroad. They influenced policy decisions and shaped international interactions. They participated in human rights, democracy, and good governance movements in the United States and online. They equally took part in international election observation missions to promote democratic standards and transparency. Also they took part in public diplomacy through their activities such as participation in public debates, speaking at international forums, and writing opinion pieces to influence global perceptions and policies, further raising their voices on global political relations.⁵⁸

Poor relations between Nigeria and the United States also led to occasional tightening of immigration policy, which in turn limited the migration of Nigerians to the United States. Following the annulment of 12 June, 1993 presidential election, and a coup which brought Sani Abacha to power, the United States released a proclamation under the Immigration and Nationality of 1965, which restricted Nigerian citizens, alongside their families, who prepared, enforced or gained from policies that impeded Nigeria's transition from military rule to democracy from entering the United States. Also in response to the summary execution of the Ogoni nine by the Abacha regime in 1995, U.S. sanctions on Nigeria were

expanded to include travel restrictions on the movements of Nigerian officials and diplomats visiting the United States. In addition, the United States recalled its ambassador to Nigeria.⁵⁹ The United States equally imposed stringent immigration procedures against Nigeria citizens, ban on direct flights from Nigeria to its territory, which were attributed to human rights abuses under the Sani Abacha regime. In response, the Nigerian military government engaged in handball diplomacy, accusing the United States of merely giving a dog a bad name so as to hang it.⁶⁰

As fate would have it the Nigerian military head of state, General Sani Abacha, died in 1998. Immediately after his death, the relations between Nigeria and the United States became normalised. General Abdulsalami Abubakar, who succeeded Abacha, released a plan of transition to civilian rule. The United States then engaged the regime in negotiations and had consultation with Chief M. K. O. Abiola, the winner of the 12th June, 1993 annulled presidential elections in Nigeria. Unfortunately Abiola slumped and died during a meeting with the United States State Department officials barely a month after the death of Sani Abacha. Nonetheless, the U.S. continued to press the Nigerian military leadership for a return to democratic rule. Nigeria eventually returned to democracy in 1999 with former Head of State, President Obasanjo as a civilian President. Upon assuming office, President Obasanjo regularised diplomatic relations with the United States. With the normalisation of relations, the United States lifted visa restrictions on Nigerian officials and vacated its trade limits with Nigeria as well as ending its embargo on military cooperation. Human mobility between Nigeria and the United States increased within this period onward even as the U.S. began a training programme for five Nigerian battalions in peacekeeping operations, accompanied by an enlarged project of cooperative military education.⁶¹

Towards the end of the first decade of the 21st century, a major incident that strained Nigeria-United States relations occurred. On 25th October 2009 a Nigerian by name Umar Abdulmutallab Farouk made an attempt to detonate an explosive device onboard flight 253 from Amsterdam to Detroit. Fortunately, the device was not able to explode. It merely ignited and injured Umar Abdulmutallab and two other passengers while the flight crew restrained Umar Abdulmutallab and the plane safely landed.⁶² The Obama administration promptly added Nigeria to the United States' terrorist list, which implied that Nigeria was a possible "Terrorist State". The diplomatic row between Nigeria and the United States which followed this inclusion of Nigeria in the terrorist list alongside other 14 terrorist countries created a lot of fuss. The U.S. Transportation Security Administration (TSA) introduced new security rules on passengers which involved stringent scrutiny of passengers flying from countries like Nigeria to the United States. The development was capable of discouraging would-be foreign investors who would be doing business with Nigeria as they would not want their reputation to be smeared by commercial interactions under a terror watch-list. The development had the implication of limiting the flow of migration from Nigeria to the United States with the period it lasted. The Nigerian Government and citizens were disappointed in the United States for such an extreme decision. The Nigerian National Assembly promptly condemned the development and specifically issued a seven-day ultimatum to the United States government to delist Nigeria from the terror related lists or face grave reciprocal consequences.⁶³

In 2020, the United States under the leadership of President Donald Trump imposed travel restrictions on Nigeria. The new immigration policy abrogated issuance of visas for travellers seeking permanent residency in the United States. This generated resentment from the Nigerian authorities. In response Nigerian opened diplomatic talks with U.S. officials to understand and address the issues raised. A ministerial committee led by Minister of Interior, Rauf Aregbesola, was set up to liaise with the U.S. government. Nonetheless, this illustrates how poor relations can inhibit migration between nations. The U.S. authorities cited lapses in

security as the reason for imposition of the travel ban.⁶⁴ The Trump's immigration measures were considered hostile and alienation message to Nigeria. Geoffrey Onyeama, who was then the minister of Nigeria's foreign affairs expressed over the U.S. action. Former Nigeria Vice President Atiku Abubakar, opined that: "The ban does not take into account the pro-American sentiments of the Nigerian public ... and the solidarity previous Nigerian administrations have had with the United States." The ban appeared to be an antithesis to another U.S. policy for Africa introduced earlier in 2018 by the Trump's administration aimed at prioritizing trade and the fight against Islamic militants.⁶⁵

In an interview, Jacob Oluona, a Professor of African Religious Traditions at Harvard Divinity School and Professor of African and African American Studies in Harvard's Faculty of Arts and Sciences, asserts that about one million Nigerians have immigrated to the United States either temporarily or to live permanently. The immigration, according to him, strengthened relations between Nigeria and the United States due to the fact that several Nigerians knew a friend or family member resident in the United States, and had positive perception of the United States through such affinities. Oluona argues that the Nigerian leadership had little leverage in its relationship with the United States due to its susceptibility in post-Cold War era and increasing economic crisis. Its leverage therefore was its people, larger population, transitional Nigerian citizens and cultural capital that cut across state-to-state relations.⁶⁶

The Nigerian American Chamber of Commerce (NACC) seeks to promote trade and investment between Nigeria and the United States and provided support for Nigerian entrepreneurs. NACC was significant in fostering bilateral trade and investment between Nigeria and the United States. It facilitated market access for Nigerian businesses, and offered entrepreneurs capacity training.⁶⁷ There was also U.S.-Nigeria Council (USNC) which was devoted to building commercial and business ties between the United States and Nigeria. The Council built and supported long-term business partnerships between US and Nigerian companies that drive innovation, entrepreneurship, technology transfer, job creation, and economic growth in both economies. AN Global is another important organisation which served as forum of entrepreneurs in the black community with common interests. It has been active since 1993 when it was established. It provided secured space to network, and to exchange ideas, offerings and engage in various business activities.⁶⁸ Its founder, Avinash Nickkawde, said in 2023:

What we can do for Nigerian entrepreneurs is in two-folds; one is franchising so, if there are businesses working well, we can help them to expand into the US, Canada, Australia, UK and other countries we have our presence. We are here to make Nigerian businesses, especially Small and medium-sized enterprises a global company. We will continue to build on the opportunity in Nigeria. We are here to help SMEs community in Nigeria and help them grow. There are small-scale companies that show that their concept can be proven but they don't know where to go to get help and how to get it so, we have a one-stop-shop solution; we have been able to help local communities in other climes and we are willing to do so in Nigeria....⁶⁹

Nigerian migrants in the United States have been instrumental in lobbying the United States government on behalf of Nigeria and Nigerians. They did this sometimes individually and some other times through advocacy or cultural groups. The Nigerian-Americans lobbied the United Congress and helped to influence visa and immigration policies. They also pressed for and advocated for U.S. aid and development programmes. During the military rule from 1993 -1998, exiled Nigerian opposition groups set up U.S. outposts. For instance, Nigerian migrants in the United States participated actively in the foreign mission of prodemocracy group dubbed, National Democratic Coalition (NADECO). NADECO established a mission

in the U.S. through which it coordinated global pressure on the Nigerian military government. It organised several events, set up Radio Kudirat and gathered on Capitol Hill to demand elections and respect for human rights in Nigeria. They lobbied the U.S. Congress, leading to congressional statements and visa bans on the junta leaders in Nigeria.⁷⁰

There were also the environmental and Niger delta advocacy groups which were active between 2000 and 2010. Notable among these civil society movements was the Nigerian diaspora group in the United States dubbed Council of Ogoni Professionals International. In 2012, the Council of Ogoni Professionals International, through quiet lobbying, as the leader described its activities, secured hearing on the Ogoni-Oil Delta clean-up. Anslem John-Miller, leader of the Council, testified at the hearing and urged the Nigerian diaspora to lobby their representatives on Niger Delta justice. This placed the Ogoni-land pollution matter on the agenda of the U.S. Congress.⁷¹

On its part, the Nigerian Centre in Washington D.C., a non-profit Nigerian immigrants outfit, met in 2023 to discuss “state of the Union on Immigration.” The meeting was a gathering of immigration lawyers and African immigrants. The public forum was predicated on President’s Biden 2023 State of the Union Address. It was convened to deliberate on and review aspects of the President’s Biden 2023 address that affected African immigrant community and to assess immigration policies that affected the community. On 24 February, 2023 more than 100 local, state, and national organizations, led by the Nigerian Centre in Washington, D.C. called on President Joe Biden, Department of Homeland Security Secretary, Alejandro Mayorkas, and Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, to allow immediate designation of Temporary Protected Status (TPS) and Special Student Relief (SSR) for Nigeria. According to the Nigerian Centre, TPS protects non-citizens in the United States, alongside undocumented immigrants, who could safely return to their home country. TPS designations were important to Black immigrants who might slip through cracks in the asylum system. The coalition pressed concerned Americans to reach out to their elected official to support the designation for Nigeria.⁷²

Christopher Isike elucidates more on the interaction between Migration and Nigeria-U.S. relations in one of his seminar works. He argues that Nigerian migrants resident in the U.S. helped to promote Nigeria’s interests in the international community. Nigeria through Nigeria Diaspora Commission and other relevant agencies has engaged with this diaspora population in the United States to leverage their skills, networks and resources to achieve socio-economic and political goals to pursue its national development. Migrants of Nigerian origin in the United States and United States citizens living in Nigeria connected five diplomacy objectives that have soft power implications for the United States and Nigeria relations. These included the following: improving the image of their home countries; securing the support of their host countries for policies or interventions targeted to their home countries; shaping perceptions of their host countries within the home countries; fostering material exchanges between the home and the host countries; and encouraging the settlement and integration of their compatriots in the home countries.⁷³

The Nigerians who moved to live in the United States, as mentioned earlier, came together in various cultural associations through which they proactively improve the image of their home state in the United States and globally as other nations’ migrants lived among them in that country. The private-sector and state officials in Nigeria on different occasions reached out to them for that reason. The Nigerian-American population in America or Americans living and doing business in Nigeria also had cause to advocate for intervention or policy change by their host country designed for their home State. Isike drives home his point with the stance of Thomas Ambrosio who argues that leveraging diaspora to get insights for its foreign policy engagements with their home States has been an enduring aspect of the United States foreign policy thrust. There is the instance of the Presidential

Advisory Council on African Diaspora set up 2022 at the U.S.-Africa Leaders' Summit for the U.S. administration under Joe Biden to embrace and engage America's African Diaspora. In a nutshell, Nigerian immigrants in the United States and American citizens in Nigeria act as plenipotentiaries for their home states, encouraging cultural exchange, trade, investment, and tourism initiatives.⁷⁴

Migration patterns create diaspora communities that enhance a country's soft power in the international arena. Soft power is a term in international studies used to describe a country's "ability to influence others through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion or force".⁷⁵ It is used to influence the choices of other countries through invisible assets like alluring personality, political, cultural values and institutions as well policies that are seen as having moral authority or legitimacy. A nation's soft power is a vital instrument in international relations. It helps to foster cooperation between countries without resorting to military aggression—through economic, cultural-cum-diplomatic means, foreign aid, popular culture or international collaboration. In fact, the Nigerian diaspora in the United States has become foreign policy agency. Members of the diaspora community of country serve as the vehicle for promoting tourism, attracting investment and pressing for policy changes. Data collected from Nigerian-Americans living in four U.S. states of Georgia, Maryland and Texas in 2021 reveal some soft power attributes of Nigerian migrants community in that country.⁷⁶

Prominent among Nigeria's soft power attributes are cultural exports. They include Nollywood film and music, Nigerian dress, food and other indigenous products. They include Nigerian political and iconic personalities like Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Fela Kuti, and Chimamanda Adichie. Other products that enhance Nigeria's soft power include sporting achievements, mediation roles, international peace keeping efforts, and offering of public goods through agencies like the Technical Aid Corps Scheme (TACS). These were soft power resources within the ambit of three elemental scales of political values, cultural attraction and foreign policy advanced by Nye, the international relations doyen. The Nigerian migrant population have been actively contributing to the United States development and progress, and in so doing enhancing Nigeria's soft power credentials in manners capable of helping to counter the negative global notoriety of Nigerians as "criminally-minded people".⁷⁷

Moreover, as Zulfikar Bhutto rightly finds in his study, stringent immigration policies can strain diplomatic relations, particularly when they affect the treatment and rights of migrants from the origin country. Such policies may generate tensions, because origin nations would consider such actions as detrimental or discriminatory to its citizens in the host country introducing the policies. On the other hand, favourable migration policies, which allow for legal pathways to migration, promote cooperation between countries, usually leading to better trade, security partnerships, and cultural exchange.⁷⁸ For example, when the United States came up with stringent immigration laws and subsequently imposed travel restrictions on Nigerian citizens in 2020, the Nigerian authorities and diaspora were disappointed in the measures.⁷⁹ Again following President Trump's mass deportation foreign policy in 2024, the Nigerian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Yusuf Tugar, called on the United States to respect the dignity of Nigerian migrants in the United States and not to return them home in chains. The United States policy on immigration generated a lot of fuss across Nigeria with public opinion divided between calling for reciprocal measures against the United States and others calling for cautionary approach.⁸⁰

CONCLUSION

It is concluded, based on the findings that, whether temporary or permanent, migration is a crucial phenomenon in international relations, which is not fully explained by mere push-pull factors and is not a unidirectional activity. While well-known push-pull factors such as

educational opportunities, economic disparity and political instability remain relevant, it is discernible from the study that bilateral dynamics are equally powerful determinants of migration. The intersection between bilateral relations and migration patterns, when viewed through the lens of their costs and benefits, is a feedback loop in which migration influenced the nature of relations between Nigeria and the United States; and the nature-cum-direction of that cooperation significantly shapes migration patterns. Migrants are not mere subjects of regulation but are strategic actors in the bilateral relations, capable of fostering shared interests in an interdependent international order.

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