

**THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE JAPA SYNDROME ON THE CHURCH IN NIGERIA**

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**Abstract**

It is a truism that migration or movement from place to place is one of the fundamental human rights. It is equally a fact that migration has aided in no mean measure in the socio-economic, political and religious growth and development of Nigerian. Though migration belongs to the nature of man, it is not intended to be forced but should flow out of one's free choice. It is however observed that the Japa syndrome which has become a phenomenon of great concern to the Nigerian society and the church is the craze among young professionals and skilled men and woman to flee the shores of Nigeria for greener pastures. The paper highlights hunger, lack of jobs for graduates, insecurity among other drives as responsible for this rush to leave Nigeria. The qualitative method of data analysis was employed in this work; whereas both the primary and secondary means of data collection were adopted. The gathered data were analysed with the aid of the phenomenological approach. It equally maintains that migration has enabled the expansion of the kingdom of God and openness to the diversity of culture which enriches the human family. That notwithstanding, the policy makers and leaders of the civil society and church should put in place measures that will dissuade the rush to flee but promote patriotism and faith in the Nigerian family and project.

**Keywords:** Japa, Syndrome, Church, Migration, Nigeria.

**Introduction**

Migration commonly referred to Japa in the Yoruba parlance is said to mean a flight from homeland to far away land. Whether one refers to it as Japa or migration it is important to note that migration is part of human existence. To cease to migrate or move is to cease to exist. He/she who does not move is dead since, movement is one of the distinguishing characteristics of every living thing (Dung, Alelaide et al., 2019).

Every civilization of the world has been made possible through the process of migration where in one way or the other they have been engaged in commerce and learning as well as exchange of ideas and services. Abram was called to leave his country, his kindred

and father's house for a country far away where he was to be shown; in that country, he would be made a great and famous nation (cf. Genesis 12: 1-20). The children of Israel during the great famine migrated to Egypt for survival, there they were greatly multiplied despite all odds and were formed into a formidable and great nation (cf. Genesis 46:1-7). Their later movement from Egypt to the promise land was accompanied with new knowledge and wisdom and technical ability. Added to the acquired skills and knowledge, they left with silver and gold given to them by the Egyptians. That way, they left Egypt richer than they entered and became more equipped to face the future (cf. Exodus 12:31-36).

The civilization of most African countries like Nigeria gives credence to the return of citizens who migrated to the foreign lands and returned enlightened to contribute to the emancipation and development of the country through education:

The statistical scope of the syndrome of departure is hard to confirm. The U.S. census Bureau... shows that African immigrants had the highest educational accomplishment of all immigrant groups in the age group of those twenty five and older... A generational analysis points to the fact that the first generation of African scholars trained overseas under the ideology of questing for the Golden Fleece? Returned and trained others (Kalu, 2008).

The immigrants equally contributed to commerce and economic development of the nation as noted by Buar (2009) Among the most enterprising liberated slaves were the Yoruba from Nigeria. Some of them bought a ship and started a regular trade between sierra Leone and Yoruba land. Others decided to return to their home country for good while they settled down at Abeokuta.

The emancipated African slaves who had received education in Europe expressing nationalist aspirations in the church accepted the scheme of Henry Venn who proposed an African church that is self-supporting, self-governing and self extending with enthusiasm while seeing in it the opportunity to exercise an "independent native capacity" and hoping that independence in church government would naturally lead to political independence (Baur, 2009).

Strengthening the stance that migration enhances civilization and development Francis maintains:

Migration, more than ever before, will play a pivotal role in the future of our world... the arrival of those who are different, coming from other ways of life and cultures, can be a gift, for “the stories of migrants are always stories of an encounter between individuals and between cultures. For the communities and societies to which they come, migrants bring an opportunity for enrichment and the integral human development of all (2020).

The United Nations in its agenda for 2030 recognizes the positive contribution of migrants to inclusive growth and sustainable development. The agenda’s core principle is to “leave no one behind”, which includes migrants and therefore calls on countries to “facilitate orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration and mobility of people, including through the implementation of planned and well managed migration policies” ([www.un.org](http://www.un.org)-) retrieved on 14.11.2023.

It is clear that owing to bad governance, unemployment, unfavourable working conditions, insecurity in Nigeria amongst other factors; the youth, professionals and the skilled workers in Nigeria resort to seeking for greener pastures in foreign countries. This poses grave threats to the Church’s labour force as the country is left “brain drained” with few prospective skilled workers and professionals to fill the vacuum left in various ecclesiastical environments and other fields of endeavour.

### **The Drives Behind Migration (The Japa Syndrome)**

Since migration is a phenomenon as old as man’s existence, the reason for migration in years ago may differ with what obtains today. That notwithstanding, it is worth to note that despite the differences in time and situations, there are drives that are constant and universal which cannot be altered by time. Hunger is always there. There is always the desire for a better and higher quality life, peace, better living environment, political and economic stability as well as social balance.

The “Sapa Syndrome, that is Hunger and naked poverty prevalent among many households in Nigeria today is a key driving factor why many opt to Japa-to remain far away from home not minding the inconveniences that go with the Japa-Syndrome. According to the United Nations International Organizations for migration (IOM), in 2020, 281 million people, or 3.6 percent of all people in the world were migrants. “These migrants embark on dangerous and sometimes fatal journeys to escape poverty or oppression in hopes of a better life elsewhere” (<https://worldmigrantreport.10m.int-retrieved> 14.11.2023).

Other than the already observed reason in this paper of Nigerians migrating for the purpose of returning to better the life and development of the people and motherland, “it must be recognized that the desire to emigrate is a syndrome determined by generational, ideological and contextual shifts. Thus, incentives, governance, political culture, and policies on capacity development, quest for meaning and self development have triggered the syndrome, or desire to emigrate” (Kalu, 2009).

It is equally noticed that some people are forced to move away from homeland due to conflict, religious and tribal incursions, as well as wars. For the catholic church “the right to migrate, a fundamental human right”, which should always be free is today, “forced by conflicts, natural disasters, or more simply the impossibility of living a dignified and prosperous life in one’s native land. Besides, persecutions, wars atmospheric phenomena and dire poverty, fear or desperation” (Francis, 2023). As regards migrants and refugees building conditions or peace means in practice being seriously committed to safeguarding first of all the right not to emigrate, that is, the right to live in peace and dignity in one’s own country. In as much as some are pushed and forced to flee their homelands for safety, some are pulled away from motherland to be part of a seemingly beautiful experience made possible through the social media:

Buoyant economies tend to create pulls on lower economies rural-urban pulls always catalyze minor migration. International migrations are tied to complex social networks that have arisen as a result of the long process of globalization (Kalu:2009).

On a more positive and spiritual plane, migration is driven by the “law of ekstasis”-a law propelling love beyond oneself. Herein, one is challenged to find fuller meaning in existence through relationship with others I cannot know myself apart from a broaden network of relationships... man always has to take up the challenge of moving beyond himself for our relationship if healthy and authentic open us to others who expand and enrich us (Wojtyla, 1982).

Furthermore, “no one can experience the true beauty of life without relating to others, without having real faces to love. Life exists where there is bonding, communion, fraternity; and life is stronger than death when it is built on true relationships and bonds of fidelity. There is no life when one claim to be self- sufficient and live as islands” refusing to move beyond ourselves The desire for quality education and the need to graduate in record time drives migration in Nigeria thus “Many think the best way is academic. Nigerian students

typically view education as the easiest path to migration. And in recent years, the number of Nigerian students enrolled in universities abroad has skyrocketed” (Liu, 2023).

It is taught within Pentecostal circles that divine health and material prosperity are the rights and privileges of every believer who will appropriate enough faith to receive them, therefore the pull and push to move out for greener pastures is the belief to make it big by faith (Mpigi, 2017).

### **Japa in the Eyes of the People**

In the global eyes, migrants are considered intruders who invade foreign lands to reap the fruits they did not plant. They are treated with disdain and kept at arm’s length. They are excluded from the plan of the society and seen as unproductive, thus tagged as “emblems of exclusion and society ills” Exclusivism is experienced because of the extreme individualism combined with utilitarianism enforced by the social media producing indifference to the emigrants. The migrants are treated with meanness because at times no one is prepared for their sudden entry into foreign lands. This meanness towards the migrants is shown in the imprisonments, physical assaults, murder, sacking of the migrants from foreign lands and intolerance dispositions towards them (Francis, 2019).

Migration is believed to be affecting the work demography:

Migration can lead to demographic changes in sending as well as in host countries, examples of such changes could be gender imbalance, changes in the average age in a society, or changing fertility rates (<https://www.migrationresearch.com-retrieved> 17/11/2023).

Japa syndrome has really affected family ties and friendship adversely. It has broaden the scope of secrecy among family members, close associate and friends. It heightens distrust and increases doubt among friends, who are now finding it difficult to understand what friendship means. This is so because the Japa plans always shrouded in secrecy makes the other appear a traitor:

Migration can be expected to alter social relationships, for Nigerians who Japa, kinship bonds and boundaries, shorten and

shrink from extended affiliations into the morphological unit of the nuclear family-to parents and siblings. Most friendships succumb to distance and crumble under the weight of relocation. Adding to these existing strains is the secrecy of Japa. Few people share their Japa plans beforehand, ensuring that the initial shock of discovery reverberates long after their abrupt departure... (Liu, 2023).

This Japa syndrome is considered a rob of the investment made by Nigeria on her citizens. Every Nigerian who flees the country after acquiring education and training here fails to show appreciation to the nation for the resources expended in his/her training. More so, “Japa syndrome affects the labour force of Nigeria adversely since the youth, professionals, and the skilled workers in Nigeria are predominantly involved in this mass Exodus” (Afunugo, 2023).

Notwithstanding the view above, some have praised the Japa-syndrome as a gain for Nigeria:

I have always preached and maintained this same position that “our brain drain today will be our brain gain, tomorrow...Nigerians leaving the country may look like a loss today, but when we start doing the right things and taking the governance of our nation more seriously, the knowledge and resources from them will be critical in the building of the new Nigeria.. (Oluwasanjo, 2023).

It has been described as a rush into voluntary slavery (Obinna, 2023). The Japa syndrome is considered slavery because the greener pasture the young people seem to be seeking outside the shores of Nigeria is not truly green as most Nigerians who abandon lucrative jobs back home for foreign lands are said to be making do with menial jobs just for their survival. The craze to make it outside Nigeria has led some Nigerians to seek asylum in other countries thereby leaving the motherland substandard and bereft of skills.

Migration makes life difficult for the receiving countries as they have to struggle with over population and the duty of providing the needed social infrastructure and the problem of contending with the number of people with cultures and training different from theirs. Thus, it leads to increase in discrimination, xenophobia and racism. Migration poses health challenges to the migrants and receiving countries. Migration gives Nigeria the opportunity of being a

serious player in global development as her professional potentially gains world class status thereby becoming ambassadors of Nigeria's professional environment (Johnson, 2022).

### **Implications of the Japa Syndrome on the Church in Nigeria**

The stories of Nigerian immigrants to various parts of the world for greener pastures has left some indelible marks on the Church in Nigeria in various degrees both negative and positive. Nigeria is renowned for having a sizable human capital both social and religious, which continues to be one of its soft power assets in the international arena. These professionals flee the country on daily basis in their numbers so that there is no sector of the Nigerian state that is not affected Church workers, University lecturers, high school teachers, medical personnels, bankers and many more. These men and women are members of one church or the other, and as they leave, whatever positions they occupied in the is left vacant. These movements have some implications on the church.

### **Frequent Changes in Ministry Positions**

Lack of continuity results when workers are coming and going every now and then. While in theory this may result in producing a stronger lay commitment to keep things going and also gives opportunity to new leaders to emerge, in reality it more often leads to people feeling abandoned. All too often, such churches can only attract the services of ministers who have failed to obtain appointment to a more 'desirable' location with greater prospects (Gibbs, 2022)

### **Unresolved Personal and Pastoral Conflicts**

It is evident that many pastors who migrate from Nigeria do so without resolving the conflicts in the church and it continues to affect issues and programmes of the church. Innovative research conducted in the 1970s by John S. Savage revealed that a major cause of church members becoming inactive was anxiety produced by conflict with either an outgone pastor or member that was no resolved. That if their initial anxiety was not resolved it turned into anger which in turn caused them to withdraw from their services in the church (Savage, 2010)

### **Brain Drain**

Dapo Asaju, in his view, opines that brain drain as a result of the "Japa Syndrome" is affecting the transformative economy of the country and the church. He noted that the number

of graduates and professionals who had left the country over the years was alarming, and that transformative economy would only happen when the brain drain stops.

Asaju noted that it was pathetic that government had not shown any concern nor worry about the implications of the Japa Syndrome on the future of the country. He said that the frustration which many young professionals were facing in the country was responsible for their preference to emigrate to foreign countries to achieve greener pastures. The future leadership of Nigeria rests on the youthful generation. If potential leaders desert the country for selfish reasons, they will deny the country of their leadership and expertise. That the huge amount of money Nigerians were investing to obtain a masters degree programme abroad was worrisome.

The situation awakens the church to be active to the gospel demands, feeding the hungry, healing the sick and clothing the naked (Matthew 25:34ff). The church has to be alive to the needs of members helping one another, becoming brothers' keepers, sharing everything in common and working for the common good as it was in the beginning of Christianity; (Acts 2: 44-45).

To enable migration become to be a choice and not force, the ideals of the first Christian community should be rekindled and efforts must be made to ensure to everyone an equal share in the common good, respect for his or her human development.

In a world where humanity is battling with individualism and exclusivism, the church should work for the inclusion of all in her development programmes. "No one must be excluded. God's plan is essentially, inclusive and gives priority to those living on the existential peripheries. Among them are many migrants and refugees, displaced persons and victims of trafficking. The kingdom of God is to be built with them" (Francis, 2022), for without them it would not be the kingdom that God wants. It involves therefore appreciating and valuing the contributions of each of them not as invaders or destroyers, but willing laborers and investors who are desirous of rebuilding the walls of the new Jerusalem, that Jerusalem whose gates are open to all peoples (Cf. Isaiah 60:10-11).

The migration of the youth and some leaders of the church help the growth of the church in foreign lands. They become the carriers of the message of the Gospel to areas where the joy of the Gospel seems to be dead. Thus, they become missionaries re-evangelizing the western world. This way the rich Nigerian culture of worship is transported to the wider world thus:

The contributions of the migrants and refugees have been fundamental to the social and economic growth of our societies. Their work, their youth, their enthusiasm and their willingness to sacrifice enrich the communities that received them. Yet this contribution could be all the greater when it is optimizing and supported by carefully developed programmes and initiatives (Francis, 2022).

It implies therefore the need to empower the migrants leads the church to developing programmes that will enable the migrants remain faithful and worthy ambassadors of the church wherever they find themselves.

Migration enhances the acceptance of others and appreciation of the spiritual and religious differences as well as the growth in faith of each person. It enables growth in our common humanity and gingers a building together of an ever greater sense of togetherness in the church. Openness to one another creates avenues of fruitful exchange between various visions and traditions (Francis, 2022).

Migration of some church leaders and members lighten the burden of the church in terms of training and stipends as they would have to combine working and pastoral works. They equally contribute their quota to the building of the local church through their various returns and support to the church thus helping to sustain the poor members of the church:

Many combine pastoral work with their secular profession, indeed, the Christ Embassy Port Harcourt Nigeria insists that all pastors in the international sector must earn their wages through secular employment. This reduces friction over financial matters, cuts operational costs and enables the congregations to expand their facilities faster (Kalu, 2009).

When the church is open and willing to allow her members proceed while encouraging them to do so regularly and legally, the church becomes enriched, productive and missionary:

Opening ourselves to other does not lead to impoverishment, but rather enrichment, because it enables us to be more human: to recognize ourselves as participants in a greater collectivity and to understand our life as a gift for others to see as the goal, not our own interest but rather the good of humanity (Francis, 2016).

Being missionary, the church must accompany her members wherever they go and should be willing to go forth and move forward “boldly take the initiatives, go out to others, seek those who have fallen away, stand at the crossroads and welcome the outcast”

The situation empowers the church in every pastoral and spiritual activity must always put the person at the centre, in his or her many aspects. This is applicable to all people, whose fundamental equality must be recognised. Therefore, “development cannot be restricted to economic growth alone. To be authentic it must be well rounded; it must foster the development of each man and of the whole man” (Paul Vi, 1967).

### **Loss of Members by Death**

The negative effect the church seems to be suffering as a result of “Japa-Syndrome” is the loss of members to death who may choose to use the irregular route in their quest to escape the country. The church equally becomes secondary victim of trafficking as her members are taken away and used as sex workers and things of the like.

A weak faith when taken away from the shores of Nigeria may be lost due to the craze to make wealth and enjoy the beauty of life thus; the church in Nigerian finding herself in the midst of modernity, externality and globalization, if not well founded runs the risk of losing its depths (Kalu, 2009).

### **Loss of Membership**

Another danger Lurking the church in Nigeria is the abandonment of the mother church by members and the founding of individual churches with some personal interest; “some start by holding outreaches that mobilize a number of indigenous ministries, but gradually create resentment by starting their own branches” (Kalu, 2009)

### **Conclusion**

Migration is one of the fundamental human rights as it is a process of self awareness, improvement and contribution to the human society, growth, development and enrichment. Migration opens the mind to accept and appreciate the diversity imbedded in the human environment as well as humbles one to acknowledge the importance of the other above self.

However, it is worrisome and a big challenge to the Nigerian society and the church in Nigeria, as most of the skilled men and women, professionals and youth prefer to move just

for the sake of moving away. They opt for this departure because they hold the idea that fleeing the country will soothe the pains of hardship.

This being the case therefore, to curb this Japa-Syndrome, policies should be put in place that will enable the citizens to be patriotic and work for the betterment of the Nigerian society. The leaders of the Nigerian state should offer to the citizens the possibility of a dignified and fulfilling life, whether individually or within the family. Leaders should be transparent, honest and far sighted and at the service of all, especially those most vulnerable (Francis, 2023). The church should remain the voice of the voiceless and light to the nations. The programmes of the church should ginger faith in God and in the progress of the country. The church should always train her members to remain good citizens and leaders, who ensure the peaceful coexistence of the Nigerian citizens with other nations of the world.

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