

‘Prohibited Migrants’: Nigerian Labour Diasporas in Liberia in the 1930s

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Abstract

This article interrogates the conditions of Nigerian labour diasporas and intending migrants to Liberia in the inter-war years in the light of the global economic crunch of the late 1920s and early 1930s. While highlighting the necessity of an intra-West African labour highway during the period, the article assesses the conditions which Nigerian labour diasporas and intending migrants found themselves in, the responses of the Nigerian authorities to the pressure from the Liberian government, and the impact of those responses on the migrants.

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Introduction

Labour studies and the migration of people from one place to another have received a considerable attention from scholars across the world. With particular reference to the West African sub-region, Aderanti Adepoju and Akande, J. have done comprehensive studies on labour migration in the sub-region from the angles of socio-economic, and legal considerations respectively.¹ Faluyi’s contribution in this corridor of intellectual activity concerns the role of migrants in the socio-economic development of Lagos from the earliest times to 1880, where he argued that migration contributed to the growth and development of Lagos because of the impact it had on the socio-economic and cultural life of the settlement from the earliest times to 1880.² Although Faluyi’s effort helped to shed light on the migration and influx of West Africans, especially from the Sierra Leone/Liberia axis to Lagos, the scope of the work does not

cover the 1930s, especially the migration of Nigerians to Liberia during the inter-war years.

The 1930s witnessed major economic and social upsets across the world because of the devastating effects of the Great Depression, which started after the fall of the New York Stock Exchange and the crisis of the Wall Street generally between October and November 1929.³ The debates on the causes of the fall of the New York Stock Exchange has remained as fresh as ever in the light of a repeated display of history as exemplified by the Second Great Depression currently witnessed by the global economy, which like the first, also has its root in the fall of the New York Stock Exchange. What scholars are unanimous about is the fact that the first depression had calamitous consequences on the entire world as:

some of the most respected banking houses (in the world) were forced to close their doors and tens of thousands of small investors were wiped out...the holocaust was complete...market shriveled and disappeared, production faltered and stopped, manual labourers, salesmen, clerks, technicians, and junior executives began to receive notices of dismissal...⁴

The impact, which the depression had on the entire world, was mostly brought about by the fact that by 1919, the United States had become the financial capital of the world because of her leading role in global industrialism and capitalism. The two concepts connected Europe with American firms, in addition to a greater amount of American capital investments on the European continent. The crash therefore led to a halt in new lending, in addition to reducing and curtailing the spending power of people across the world.

Liberia's new labour policy on Nigerians is understood in the light of the conditions of the depression regime. Indeed, throughout the early 1930s, thousands of people felt the pinch of hunger that accompanied the depression. International trade and production had declined with ominous steadiness and

governments in several countries of the world sought strenuously to stave off trouble by implementing policies and programmes, including retrenchment and fiscal stringency as well as immigration control that would protect the national interest of their countries and ensure the survival of their people. It was in the aftermath of that depression that the government of Liberia enacted regulations to control the influx of West Africans to the country as a way of safeguarding its socio-economic interest.

Conceptual Framework

The key concepts in this work include prohibited immigrants and labour diasporas. Prohibited immigration in the context of this study involves entering into a country by land, sea or air of any person being or appearing to be any of the following categories of persons:

- a) any person who is without visible means of support or is likely to become a pauper or a public charge;
- b) any idiot or insane person;
- c) any person who, from official government records, or from information officially received by the Governor from a Secretary of State, or from the officer, or from any foreign minister or from any foreign colony or protectorate or any British Passport Control Officer is deemed by the Governor to be undesirable;
- d) any person who is shown, by evidence which the Governor may deem to be sufficient, to be likely to conduct himself so as to be dangerous to peace and good order in Nigeria, or to excite enmity between the people of Nigeria and His Majesty or to intrigue against His Majesty's power and authority in Nigeria;
- e) any native foreigner or class of native foreigner the immigration of whom is prohibited by order of the Governor;
- f) any person who:

- i) has not in his possession a valid passport, or
- ii) being a juvenile under the age of sixteen years has not in his possession a valid passport or is not accompanied by an adult on whose valid passport particulars of such juvenile appear...;
- g) any prostitute;
- h) any person who is or has been:
 - i) a brothel keeper,
 - ii) a house holder permitting the defilement of a young girl on his premises,
 - iii) a person allowing a person under thirteen years of age to be in a brothel,
 - iv) a person causing or encouraging the seduction or prostitution of a girl under thirteen year of age,
 - v) a person trading in prostitution, or
 - vi) a procurer.⁵

Item a above captures the intendment and intention of the Liberian government with respect to their immigration policy in the 1930s. It related to what obtained in Nigeria during the same period. The Deportation Ordinance, as contained in the Supplement to Nigeria Gazette No. 9 of 1939 defines a prohibited immigrant to mean a person who has entered Nigeria contrary to the provisions of the Immigration Restriction ordinance of 1939, but has not thereby committed an offence under that ordinance.⁶

The concept of labour diaspora is used in the context of this article to refer to immigrant workers (outside their homeland). The concept covers the cultural integration and intermixing of immigrants in their place of work or new society. It could also involve the process of identity transformation in terms of the images of the migrants in the minds of their host community, and the socio-economic and political consciousness of the diasporic community.⁷

Theoretical Framework

With respect to the appropriate theoretical framework to explain the plight of Nigerian migrant labour and intending travelers to Liberia during the inter-war years, the alien conspiracy theory appears attractive. The argument of this intellectual construct is anchored on the position of Schloenhardt that sometimes some nations resort to the act of “scapegoatism” against migrant labour whenever there is an economic crunch.⁸ Schloenhardt’s position agrees with the provisions of some labour conventions such as the Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention of 1958, the Equal Remuneration Convention of 1951, among others.⁹ However, the action of the Liberian government is better interpreted in the light of the circumstances and exigencies of the period. To be sure, the Liberian state needed to protect its national interest in line with happenings in the international system. Such an action agrees with the International Charter on Labour Migration, which recognises the sovereign right of states over their migration policies¹⁰ This approach to labour issues has also benefited from the Multilateral Framework for Labour Migration, which was designed at the 2004 International Labour Conference in Geneva. The approach emphasises a rights-based methodology that takes into account labour market concerns and sovereignty of states with respect to employment issues.¹¹

Labour Migration in West Africa and the Liberian Experience

Labour migration to Liberia was part of the general trend of mobility of labour in the West African sub-region since the pre-colonial period. This phenomenon should be understood within the relevant anthropological and historical contexts in which it originated. Nkamleu described pre-Africa as a “mobile continent” where migrations were basically oriented towards trade, labour and religion (in form of pilgrimages), and people were without much legal restraints and barriers.¹² Migrations were also associated with natural disasters, shifting cultivation practice, sociopolitical issues, especially internecine warfare, slavery and slave trade.¹³ In all of this, there was the

heterogeneity of migrants' population because people came from diverse background across West Africa to exchange commercial and cultural values. Indeed, migrants regarded the sub-region as an economic unit within which trade in goods and services flowed and people moved freely from one place to another.¹⁴

The colonial period witnessed an alteration in the migration patterns of West Africa by introducing and enforcing various blends of political and economic structures, including imposition of tax regimes, establishment of territorial boundaries, and enforcement of boundary rules. At the same time, colonial economic regime and recruitment policies stimulated labour migration across some areas in West Africa because of improvement in infrastructure development, which helped to link centers of production, manufacturing and extractions to areas of labour supply. Investigations suggest that labour movements were conditioned by colonial policies and practices, which superimposed a monetized economy on peasant production.¹⁵

However, until 1923, migrations in West Africa were slightly low owing to the impact of the First World War on railway construction and other logistic problems. Olukoju has indicated that the completion of the Thies-Kayes line in 1923, which was interrupted by the First World War, gave the Sudan (hinterland of West Africa) an outlet to the sea at Dakar.¹⁶ Similar projects such as the Accra-Kumasi, Accra-Sekondi lines were completed between 1923 and 1927; the Port Hartcourt-Enugu-Jos line, linking the northern and eastern parts of Nigeria was completed in 1926; the line from Dakar to Saint Louis, completed in 1885 got to Bamako, 720 miles inland, in 1923; and the Dakar-Niger and the Dakar-Saint Louis lines were linked in 1923.¹⁷ Thus, from the 1920s, transportation encouraged easier migrations as "a tamer of distance".¹⁸ From 1924 to 1932, therefore, there was increasing forced recruitment for work in the plantations of Ivory Coast, while the Gold Coast (Ghana) remained the principal destination. Between 1936 and 1939, forced labour was officially discouraged, but Ivory Coast continued to be the principal destination even after 1950.¹⁹

Liberia was within the compass of migratory flow in West Africa. By November 1931, available evidence indicates that the number of Nigerian emigrants to Liberia continued to be on the increase despite measures such as enlightenment campaigns and security operations put in place to stem the tide.

In a letter written by the British Legation in Monrovia, Liberia, to the Governor, Nigeria, dated 1st October, 1931, the Liberian government complained that

owing to the difficult economic and labour conditions now prevailing in Liberia in common with other countries, appeals to this Legation for relief by natives of neighbouring British colonies tend to show marked increase...it would be of material help in these circumstances if intending emigrants or travelers in search of work could be discouraged from proceeding to Liberia at the present time, and if particular care could be taken before facilities are allowed for the traveling of children to this country. I would suggest that as far as possible travel facilities should only be granted to persons in possession of adequate means or producing proofs of secure employment by responsible firms or persons.²⁰

The conditions of Nigerian migrants, like those of their other West African counterparts in the country were particularly pathetic because many of them could not actually feed themselves and their children and had to devise the strategy of abandoning them with caregivers and guardians. As a Liberian source indicates, “the embarrassment is particularly great in the case of children who have been handed to Liberian citizens for upbringing, and whom their guardians are no longer in a position to maintain.”²¹

Furthermore, to discourage migrants from Nigeria and other West African countries from coming to Liberia, the authorities of that country designed a policy intended to increase the hurdles to be met by intending migrants. In addition to the

arrangement that stipulated that all migrants would have to be in possession of a passport vised by the Liberian Consul, intending migrants were also required to make a deposit of £ 20, before they were permitted to enter the republic.²² The only exception to this rule concerned migrants from Europe entering Liberia under contract to serve an established firm.²³ The implication of the policy on Africans, including Nigerians was obvious going by the fact that several of the intending migrants were naturally poor and it would take a lot from them to meet the requirement.

Labour Migration in West Africa since the Colonial Period *The Responses of the Nigerian Government*

As far back as 1929, the Nigerian government had regulated the emigration of Nigerians through the relevant enabling laws of the colonial administration. The whole arrangement was anchored on the Immigration Restriction Ordinance. Within this legislative provision, there were provisions dealing with specific issues such as deportation, immigration and emigration. Specifically, the Labour Ordinance No. 1 of 1929 and particularly Section 15 made provisions for measures that would help prevent a mass emigration of Nigerian labourers to other lands such as Fernando Po and within the West African sub-region.²⁴

The Immigration Restriction Ordinance did not completely stop Nigerians from emigrating to Liberia and other related areas because the enforcing agents, including the police and immigration officers pointed out some lacuna in the law. For instance, it was observed that the law was not framed for the purpose of single individuals but for mass emigration of labourers.²⁵ This development prompted a move to amend the ordinance with a view to giving it more power to deal with the issue of individual and mass emigration of Nigerians.²⁶

Besides using legislative measures, the colonial authorities in Nigeria also experimented with tackling emigration from the point of the passport office. The police authorities in Lagos had suggested, for instance, the possibility of the passport office referring cases of application for passports to the office of

the Colonial Secretary so that intending applicants could be dissuaded to stay at home, except if such emigrants had meaningful jobs in Liberia.²⁷ However, the police boss expressed the dilemma in the whole arrangement when he noted that

inasmuch as the passport office is not controlled by me, it is difficult to get in touch with intending emigrants to Liberia, so that the present unsatisfactory economic and labour conditions in that country might be explained to them with a view to discouraging persons from leaving this country for Liberia, who have not previously secured employment but who are proceeding there in hope of obtaining work. I have, however, circulated the dispatch amongst all police officers and requested them to bring the contents to the notice of the public by such means as lies within their power.²⁸

The adoption of a police action did not achieve the desired result, as the preceding analysis has indicated. Nevertheless, the development prompted the police authorities to consider the possibility of the colonial authorities liaising with agents of shipping lines who had first hand contacts with travelers and emigrants to Liberia.

The task of instructing the shipping lines on their role in regulating and checkmating emigration of Nigerians to Liberia fell on the Principal Immigration Officer, who was also the Inspector General of Police.²⁹ In a letter to agents of shipping lines and colonial firms in Lagos, including Messrs Elder Dempster and Company Limited, Woerman Linie, Holland West Africa Line, French West Africa Lines, Italian Line c/o S.C.I.N. Marina, Lagos, Messrs John Holt and Company Ltd., and Babber West Africa Line, the immigration boss, C.W. Duncan noted that

owing to the present difficult economic and labour conditions due to general trade

depression the number of natives of Nigeria, who having emigrated to Liberia, find themselves without employment or any means of subsistence there, is showing a considerable increase. For this reason, it is expected that intending travelers to Liberia *in search of work* should (sic) be warned of the present conditions prevailing there, and discouraged, so far as possible, from carrying out their intentions. I shall be glad, therefore, if your company can render assistance in this matter, by bringing to the notice of intending emigrants to Liberia, the economic conditions prevailing in that country and the difficulty which is being experienced in obtaining employment there. It is hoped that, by acquainting them with the true position of affairs, persons who have not previously secured employment in Liberia, but are proceeding there merely in hope of obtaining work will be discouraged from doing so, at the present time. Further, it is understood that before they will be permitted to enter Liberia, intending emigrants are required to be in possession of passport vised by the Liberian Consul and to make a deposit of £ 20. It would therefore, appear to be in the interests of your company that you should ensure that prospective passengers by your ships to Liberia are in a position to comply with the immigration restrictions of that country, before being permitted to embark. Your action in this respect, will also prove of considerable assistance in restricting the immigration to that country of persons who have not previously secured employment there and are likely to become destitute.³⁰

The approach employed by officials of the colonial authorities to write to agents of the shipping lines contrasted with

the reactions to the emigration of Nigerians to the Gold Coast. In the latter case, it was the branches of the Nigerian Youth Movement in the Gold Coast and Lagos that requested to be allowed to write letters to all the shipping agencies and other stakeholders in the transport industry to stop issuance of tickets to any Nigerian man or woman traveling to the Gold Coast without sanction of the Nigerian Youth Movement in the Gold Coast as to the status of such out-going passenger, as a way of checking trafficking in young girls to the area for the purposes of prostitution.³¹

In addition to writing to agents of shipping lines in Lagos, the colonial authorities also put on notice and alerted the district officers and community leaders in Epe, Badagry and Ikorodu divisions on the security and socio-economic implications of emigration of Nigerians to Liberia. Although the local authorities in Badagry refuted the possibility of cases of persons emigrating from the district to Liberia, except a few cases of some Kru returning to their homes in Liberia, the authorities of both Epe and Ikorodu agreed to liaise with the chiefs and elders of the respective communities with a view to dissuading intending emigrants to Liberia.³² Available records point to a minimal success in the efforts of the local authorities to stem the tide of emigration of Nigerians to Liberia.³³

Conclusion

In all, the complaints of Her Majesty's Charge D'affaires in Monrovia on the subject of unemployment among natives of the British West African colonies who immigrated to Liberia in search of work were in line with the global financial and labour crises of the inter-war years. Our analysis indicates that the Great Depression caused some dislocations in the socio-economic fabrics of the Liberian society and the government was forced to adopt measures that discriminated between and among migrant settlers, intending migrants and the citizens of the republic over employment and conditions of living. This paper has highlighted those factors that encouraged the Liberian government to institute policies and measures that prohibited labour migration from Nigeria in the 1930s, the impact of the measures on

Liberian-Nigerian relations, and the genuineness or otherwise of the concern of the Liberian government over the socio-economic and security implications of the seemingly socio-economic and security nuisances caused by Nigerian emigrants to that country.

The work also examines the reactions of the various stakeholders in Nigeria to the Liberian labour policy and their effectiveness and appropriateness to the concern of the Liberian government. A summary of the various responses indicates that police action could not achieve the desired result and that the government of the day had recourse to a holistic and an all-stakeholder-approach to tackle the problem. In comparative terms, the reactions of the Nigerian government to the issue of Nigerian emigrants to the Gold Coast in the 1930s and 1940s did not get the type of coordinated effort that the Liberian case received, which explains while the latter got better responses than the former.³⁴ The Southern African case of labour migration when critically examined in comparison with that of West Africa will show a higher volume and more tolerant labour migration as illustrated by the table below:

Contract labor migration to South African mines, 1920-90.

Years	Ang.	Bots.	Lesoth.	Mala.	Moza.	Swazi	Tanz.	Zam.	Zimb	Other	Total
1920	0	2112	10439	354	77921	3449	0	12	179	5484	99950
1925	0	2547	14256	136	73210	3999	0	4	68	14	94234
1930	0	3151	22306	0	77828	4345	183	0	44	5	99355
1935	0	7505	34788	49	62576	6865	109	570	27	9	112498
1940	698	14427	52044	8037	74693	7152	0	2725	8112	70	168058
1945	8711	10102	36414	4973	78588	5688	1461	27	8301	4732	158967
1950	9767	12390	34467	7831	86246	6619	5495	3102	2073	4826	172816
1955	8801	14195	36332	12407	99449	6682	8758	3849	162	2299	192934
1960	12364	21404	48842	21934	101733	6623	14025	5292	747	844	233808
1965	11169	23630	54819	38580	89191	5580	404	5898	653	2686	232610
1970	4125	20461	63988	78492	93203	6269	0	0	3	972	265143
1975	3431	20291	78114	27904	97216	8391	0	0	2485	12	220293
1980	5	17763	96309	13569	39539	8090	0	0	5770	1404	182449
1985		18079	97639	16849	50126	12365	0	0	0	4	196068
1990	0	15720	108780	72	50104	17816	0	0	2	0	192044

Source: Adapted from Guy Blaise Nkamleu³⁵

Endnotes

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11. Ibid., p.2.
12. Guy Blaise Nkamleu, "Regional Migration in Sub-Saharan Africa", World Bank Workshop on Job Creation in Africa, Eschborn-Germany, November 27-28, 2006, p.4.
13. Ibid.
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15. Ibid.
16. Ayodeji Olukoju, "Transportation in Colonial West Africa", G.O. Ogunremi and E.K. Faluyi (eds.), *An Economic History of West Africa Since 1750*, Rex Charles Publication in association with Connel Publications, 1996, p.151.
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20. CSO: A.C. 820/17, "Intending emigrants or travelers to Liberia in search of work in re.", Inspector General's Office, Lagos, to the Honourable, the Chief Secretary to the Government, Lagos.
21. Ibid.

22. CSO: 0569/Vol.11/35, "Intending emigrants or travelers to Liberia in search of work in re.", Inspector General's Office, Lagos, to the Honourable, the Chief Secretary to the Government, Lagos.
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