

IMMIGRATION, OTHERNESS, ECONOMIC MOBILITY AND SOCIAL INCLUSION IN THE HOMETLAND

Gloria Mayen Umukoro

Department of Modern Languages and Translation Studies
University of Calabar, Calabar,
Cross River State, Nigeria.
umukorogloria@unical.edu.ng

Veronica Ebi Odey

Department of Modern Languages and Translation Studies
University of Calabar, Calabar,
Cross River State, Nigeria.

Mamina Mba Ndifon

Department of Modern Languages and Translation Studies
University of Calabar, Calabar,
Cross River State, Nigeria.

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ABSTRACT

This research focuses on the impact of migration on the Cultural identity of Francophones in the diaspora. It explores the fascinating role of Culture and identity in national and regional integration. Examining the experiences of francophone immigrants from the diaspora, the study shows how ‘otherness’ affects immigrants’ capability to self-assert and adapt to reclaim their Africaness in the homeland. Two sets of immigrants are presented; the forced immigrant (Slavery), with a forced culture and the liberal immigrant, with liberal culture. Drawing from interviews, and individual experiences, the study emphasises the role of the immigrant, the community and the institutions in successful cultural integration in the homeland.

Keywords: Migration, Otherness, Inclusion, Homeland

INTRODUCTION

Francophone African immigrants in the diaspora are choosing to return to the homeland rather than remaining in the new world. A francophone African diaspora is a group of Africans

whose first language is French or who have the French language as an official language and who because of colonialism have assimilated the French culture. Resulting from the fact that there existed many French colonies in West Africa, it is worthy to note that out of the seventeen African nations in West Africa, ten are Francophones. Resulting from the dehumanizing treatments, problems of economic instability and negative sentiments, the creation of anti-immigration feelings and political groups (Henderson, 2008), and negative legislations, many immigrants have decided to either immigrate to other countries like the United States or return to their homeland.

For more than a decade, Africans have continued to migrate for various reasons. France has been the hub of immigration for both Africans and other nationals, due to her friendly policy on immigration, since her Revolution in 1789. For Francophones, apart from the French policy on immigration, their historical, cultural and linguistic connections, made them choose France as their destination over other developed nations (Umukoro & Ohanyere 2020). Because of her immigration policy, the immigrant population in France increased to about ten percent of the total population after the independence of several of the French colonies and territories, especially including West Africans. (United Nations, 2006) recorded a total number of 6,471,000 immigrants in France in 2006.

The question “Really, Why do people migrate?” arose in the course of this study. People immigrate to a destination for various reasons, such as favourable nationality laws, Friendly immigration policies, Refugee status, existence of family members, commonalities in culture, language, standardized higher education, economic opportunities and marriage among others are common pull-factors. For francophone immigrants, which is the concern of this study, being familiar with the culture and language of the destination facilitates assimilation in the new world. Because of this factor, Francophone West African immigrants have over the years chosen to eventually spend the rest of their lives in France. To confirm this, (GIST, 2001) reveals that to facilitate immigration and the acquisition of French nationality, France has created certain accord with some of its former territories.

Why do People Migrate?

It is impossible to stop people from Migrating. Historically, whether legally or illegally, people leave their homeland in search of greener pastures. For Africans, migration within

African countries has been a common practice, especially in countries that appear to be economically strong to accommodate immigrants searching for business opportunities. Over the years, there have been waves of African immigrants into countries like South Africa, Kenya, and Nigeria to start a new life. The legal immigrants unlike the illegal ones find it easy to work and live in these destinations. (Umukoro, 2018), (Hendersen, 2009), further explains that there are distinct opportunities for Non-EU members who legally enter France with appropriate visas.

The existence of family members in the new world is another facilitator to immigration. When people have a family member who is doing well in the new world, they decide to join them. For instance, the policy of ‘Regroupement familiale’, where an immigrant who has the ‘naturalization par décret’ needs for his family to join him or her can apply. (GISTI, 2008) maintains that this is also applicable to parents of adult children living in France who need for their children to take care of them, can equally join their children in France. Besides, immigrants who have other close relatives who are highly placed politically in France can decide to attempt to legally, or illegally cross the borders to start a new life with their families. It is worthy to note here that, the government of Nicolas Sarkozy included several ministers of francophone African origin, in high positions (Justice, Urban Affairs, and Human Rights) during his reign. This also facilitated the immigration of francophones to France

Again, because of her liberal policy on immigration, France has been seen as a country of human rights ie “pays des droits de l’homme” where many run to in times of trouble. The political instabilities and insecurity in Francophone West African countries like Togo, Cote d’Ivoire are some push-factors as most Francophone Africans immigrate into developed countries to seek refuge. (UNCHR, 2007) records that between 2007 and 2008, France had received a total number of 30,800 claims for asylum. For instance, Immigration to Germany had reached its peak in 2015, this resulted in the government tightening her asylum policies to discourage entry. However, records show that the number of humanitarian migrants keeps rising in Germany as she continues to receive the highest number of asylum applications in the European Union (WES, 2019)

Over the years, marriage has equally been another push-factor for people to immigrate to France. Though marriage for immigration purposes appears a difficult and complex procedure in France, there are conditions to facilitate the process. For instance, a marriage between a legal immigrant and a French national, recognized by the state, accords to the immigrant spouse’s full

right to apply for a permanent residency card to live and work within France. Very often, marriage for immigration purposes is complex and almost impossible when the foreign spouse is considered an undocumented immigrant. Higher education is another push-factor for immigration. People immigrate to countries where there is an assurance in the quality of higher education.

Immigration to other countries for whatever reasons has had its share of problems for the destinations. Immigrants whether liberal or forced, encountered problems of discrimination, oppression, dehumanization, and anti-immigrant sentiments. In France for instance, the immigrants especially the illegal (Henderson, 2008) and undocumented immigrants, are blamed for the economic and social problems in France. They believe that the incessant increase in the labour market results from the presence of foreigners not provided for. In France, this has caused a lot of problems and difficulties for the immigrants, the government as well as the natural-born French citizens, whose jobs are taken by the immigrants, especially the illegal immigrants.

In a bid to solve these problems, the French government made some unfavorable nationality regulations aimed at curbing immigration. One of these is the change in her nationality laws, which will be discussed later in this study. Finally, Francophone immigrants decision to choose destinations other than France, as well as the decision to return to their homeland and the problems of regional and national integration will be the focus of this study.

Francophone Immigration as a Cultural Practice

Immigration is one human phenomenon that is not likely to end shortly. It has become cultural. Over the years, developed countries like France, Britain, the United States, Italy, and Spain have had to deal with the issue of immigration from countries with poor standards in health care, education, employment opportunities, social welfare, etc. Citizens from these countries continue to move in their large numbers to European countries where living conditions are favourable. Gathering from interviews with African diaspora communities in France, the view is that some of these countries especially France would prefer European immigrants to Africans. In the case of France, one would think that her former colonies irrespective of nationality, race or continent would be chosen over others. However, African immigrants have been described in some cases as always eager to work, more compliant and less of a threat to society (Diouf, as cited in Roberts, 2005), they are equally enterprising, highly educated, focused

on surviving, showing responsibility to their homeland and willing to return home (Umukoro and Odey, 2020).

Immigration is considered a cultural practice amongst Francophone Africans. The desire to leave the homeland in search of a better living has become cultural and families who do not indulge in the practice are seen as backward. (Roberts, 2005) opine that African immigrants in the United States are generally better educated than other immigrant populations. African immigrants are focused on achieving their objective of leaving the homeland and returning to develop the homeland. (Umukoro 2018) sees diasporic culture or precisely immigrant culture as a tool for transforming the homeland. (Diouf, 2005) observe that most African immigrants go to the United States to complete their University Education

“L’autre” (Otherness) in the New World

Certainly, the sudden change from the ‘jus solis-right of soil’ law which gives automatic nationality to children born within France and the ‘jus sanguinis-right of the blood’ law which automatically gives children the nationality of their parents irrespective of place of birth is one major reason for Francophones choosing to leave France for good. the laws which replaced the former were, the Mehaignerie law of 1993 which was justified on the premise that a child must have fully assimilated the French culture and must be willing to be French, stated thus, ‘A child born in France by immigrant parents could not automatically become a French national until he or she is 18. This law was seen by immigrants as unfair, unjust, discriminating and dehumanizing whose children were now seen by the original French as ‘l’autre-the other’, which philosophically refers to a category of beings, seen as different internally and externally, differentiated, discriminated...inferior, unequal (Akpagu, 2019). This the author further describes as considering one to be “of a very different kind”, that is to say, that the Francophone immigrant is not the same with “us-French nationals” who are the dominant in-group, but rather belong to “them-Francophone immigrants”, “l’autre” the dominated out-group. The presence of this law resulted in so many complicated scenarios were Francophone immigrant parents could not for instance, in most cases explain the legal status of their children, thus, while parents enjoyed full citizenship rights, their children on the other hand were seen as not French- “l’autre” and could not enjoy the same.

Another reason for the decision to leave France was the 1998 Guigou Law, which totally changed the provisions for obtaining French nationality. This Law apart from denying the child of immigrant parents the automatic nationality of their parents requested the parents to petition for the child at the age of 13, with his or her consent French nationality. This again was perceived by the Francophone immigrants and non-governmental organisations what (Akpagu, 2019) termed 'racial otherness'. This process of othering is anchored on the belief that the French national parent and the Francophone immigrant parent were unequal. Thus, while the child of the French national parent is not subjected to any form of validation for acceptance, the child of the immigrant parent is prejudiced, discriminated and dehumanized and in the case of the Law governing the regroupement familiale subjected to prove their family relationship through a DNA testing (Gdamassi, 2007).

This feeling of otherness created in the Francophone immigrant a feeling of alienation, identity loss, racial discrimination, and otherness, which created a classification of people (who speak the same language, share the same cultural beliefs, and did the same jobs) into dominant in-group and the dominated out-group. The dominated out-group to which the Francophone immigrant belonged

Francophone Immigrants and National Integration

The advantages derived from immigration by both the new world and homeland cannot be overemphasized. The social, political, economic and cultural incentives on immigration remain essential to sustainable development. Immigration is seen in this study as a life-changing means, status-elevating ways societies should encourage to

While the host nation accepts support and eventually assimilates immigrants into their society, the immigrants get all the good things the destination country can offer to better their standard of living. However, integrating immigrants be it in the new world or the homeland is a process of investing in the strengths and assets they bring to bear. Remember, there is wisdom in all cultures of the world, this wisdom if discovered can greatly benefit those who find it. The question is, how do immigrants contribute to the sustainable development of a country?

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a face-to-face interview on three sets of Francophone Africans arriving from Paris-France, London-Britain and Barcelona-Spain. The interview took twelve weeks. The first phase at designated airports in selected Francophone African countries. In the second phase, Research students were asked to assist in the data collections. The results were grouped into “A” and “B”. while ‘A’ represented (forced immigrants) up to three generations who were returning home for the first time, “B” represented responses from liberal immigrants who returned home either after higher education or after achieving their goals.

Data Gathering

In the first phase, preliminary questionnaires were administered to 38 returnees to fill out while waiting for their luggage or connecting fares. Items like gender, nationality, age range, level of education, country of residence, first visit, and marital status. Reasons for returning were listed as follows; a) family reunion b) Racial discrimination c) Deportation d) Address and e) other. The second phase took place about eight months after. Only 29 of the returnees were located for further questions like 1) Why did you relocate home rather than other European countries? 2) Do you consider going back to France? 3) If No, why? 4) Do you leave alone or with family? 5) Have you found adapting to the way of life here easy? 6) What are your observations so Far? 7) How long do you intend to stay? 8) Speak freely about your experiences in France and now.

The information given by each respondent was analyzed one by one, responses were compared and conclusions were drawn based on the stories as narrated by the respondents

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Respondents in group “A-Forced immigrants”, were either relative of slaves who as a result of the new laws were no longer at home in France, so decided to trace their lineage back to the homeland, it took some time though but some succeeded. Others were trafficked, while some merely deceived by the stories they heard, decided to try it. This group of respondents was almost hit by the new laws; some had families, and most were young within the ages of 18 to 20. While the elderly ones travelled back with some of their children, the younger returnees left France without their parents who were already citizens and were benefiting. Some members of

group “A” believed that with the standard of education they have attained before leaving France, Africa would be a stepping-stone, while it was for some; others found the homeland and the people strange, complicated and difficult to adapt.

Group “B” respondents were focused on immigrants who voluntarily immigrated for greener pastures. While some planned to acquire what they went for and leave, others informed that they decided to stay back longer than they planned due to the opportunities available. However, this desire was cut short by the treatments they received from the government, and French nationals and the subsequent laws that deprived them of their expectations and finally reminded them of the homeland.

The two groups shared the following commonalities

1. They found it difficult to adapt to the homeland, though for those who came with degrees, they found it easy to get jobs, the general standard of living did not meet their expectations.
2. There were little or insufficient economic opportunities available in the homeland
3. They are likely to reconsider relocating to other western countries like the United States, China, Canada or Ukraine

CONCLUSION

Francophone African immigrants are either leaving France to other western countries or returning to the homeland. Past studies and face-to-face interviews have revealed that due to commonalities in language, culture and perceived economic opportunities, Francophone immigrants would have preferred to remain in France rather than, relocate or return home. However, the focus of this study was to find out why Francophone immigrants are returning to the homeland and the difficulties in integrating. The study was based on interviews and individual experiences of some francophone returnees. Findings reveal that while commonalities in language and culture, job, healthcare and higher education opportunities, remained pull-factors for Francophone immigrants to France, unfriendly nationality laws that led to immigration sentiments, racial discrimination, resentment were deciding factors not to remain in France. The study further reveals that, while the forced immigrants with a forced culture are finding it difficult to integrate, the liberal immigrants who willingly immigrated to the new world with a focus on improving life, and probably return home to impart in the homeland, has little or no

challenges integrating with the homeland. They are rather disappointed by the level of underdevelopment in the homeland. Thus, this study suggests that to achieve successful cultural integration, government, the community as well as the immigrants themselves have vital roles to play.

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