

The Great 'Japa' Movement: A Blessing In Disguise, Not A Cry For Help



Adekunle Olajide

02-21-2024 ~ Introduction

Many Nigerians have been leaving the country in search of better opportunities in other countries, a trend that is widely known as the 'Japa Syndrome'. This has caused a lot of controversy and sparked a lot of debate on the popular social media platform, Twitter (now X), where many users have forecasted a bleak future for the economic situation of Nigeria owing to this mass migration.

The recent change of government, with President Bola Ahmed becoming the new leader, is regarded by majority of the youth as the final reason that made them embrace the 'Japa' movement – a buzz word that has taken a rightful place in Nigeria's urban lexicon.

However, those pressing the panic button may not be seeing the bigger picture. Only a few people have looked at the situation in-depth, like a Chess Master who evaluates all the possible scenarios before making his next move. Calling the current trend, a disaster for the Nigerian economy, is like a beginner chess player who only sees the board from one angle.

Have Nigerians actually taken a moment to consider that, beyond the mere surface, this whole 'Japa' movement might actually not be a cry for help situation, but rather a blessing in disguise?

If we can just take a step back and distance ourselves from the noise on social media or opinions of internet trolls and consider the long-term prospects of the 'Japa' movement. Perhaps, amidst the buzz, we will start to see the movement as the silver lining and driving force for our socio-economic and political resurgence and development.

Nothing is New under the Sun – Not even the Great 'Japa' Movement.

The concept of movement is one that has been ingrained in the very fabric of our humanity, a universal trait inherent in our nature that cannot be blotted out. It is often stated that 'movement is merely a construct of globalization' and that by nature, humans are peripatetic beings—beings with an instinctual desire to move from one place to another in search of opportunities or desires, be they material or incorporeal desideratum. This stands as both an anthropological standpoint and an undeniable fact!

Against this backdrop, it suffices to say that there, indeed, nothing new under the sun. The mass exodus of Nigerians, or the Great 'Japa' Movement, as I comically dubbed it, is not a novel phenomenon but rather a contemporary echo of historical migration patterns. The only distinction lies in the amplified buzz created by social media, turning it into a sensationalized narrative, as if it is the next big thing since sliced bread.

From a historical perspective, the genesis of the 'Japa' movement can be traced to the 1980s, a period of military transitions, socio-economic breakdowns, and political maladministration in Nigeria. Following that, the movement took form during the urbanization wave in the country, a period when the ambitious youths migrated from their villages and hometowns to the cities, notably Lagos, Abuja, or Port-Harcourt, seeking improved working conditions and greener pastures. This trend, which was once overlooked despite its impact on agricultural productivity, has taken on a whole new level, and now we want to kick against it? So Nigerian!

Let's also not forget the darker times, when Nigerians and other Africans, in their quest to find better pastures, undertook life-threatening sojourns and illegal terrains through the great Sahara and crossing the Mediterranean in search of a better life. This movement is neither new nor did it started last years; it started way back!

Legitimacy and Legal Standpoint on Migration.

Moving on from historical records to the contemporary legal landscape, there are clearly established legal policies that fully legitimizes migration.

To begin, *Section 41* of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria affirms the inalienable right of citizens to move in and out of their homeland.

Articles 12 (2) of the African Charter on Human and People's Rights (ACHPR) and *Section 13(2)* of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) further emphasize the universal right of citizens to leave any country, including their own, and to return to their homeland.

These cogent legal perspectives underscore the legitimacy of citizens to freely move in and out of their home country and the right of people to seek employment and better opportunities wherever they may find them.

Nigeria Deserve your Gratitude.

It is quite disheartening to see Nigerians, both at home and abroad, continually tarnishing the image of the country, describing it as inhospitable, unfavorable and a place where the dreams and aspirations of Nigerians die.

This negative narrative, which is primarily aimed at triggering angst and hatred towards the Nigerian government, is often fueled by half-truths, hyperbolic comments, and warped information. This category of individuals can only be viewed as uninformed, tunnel-visioned citizens with an entitlement mentality.

These entitled critics are not aware of the historical realities of the present world powers, most especially the United Kingdom (UK) that they so much endear as the land of the golden fleece. They are not aware that, at one point in time, countries like the UK emigrated from their country and went about colonizing, conquering, and pillaging the resources of other nations, and bringing it back into the coffers of their homeland. Most of these world powers of today once emigrated to other parts of the world before becoming influential global forces.

These set of uninformed countrymen and women have forgotten that before they left the country to make exploits, Nigeria was their training ground that laid the foundation for them to migrate out of the country. Most of the graduate professionals that are now thriving in diaspora did receive their first-degree education in Nigerian tertiary institutions before leaving. Can they compare the cost of acquiring a competitive degree in Nigeria to anywhere else in the world?

Most people failed to notice that the Nigeria public tertiary education is highly

subsidized. Even in the early days, the federal government even sponsored the education of Nigerians studying overseas – our present and past university professors who got to study abroad on federal government scholarships can candidly attest being a beneficiary to the Nigerian government's beneficiary.

At present, Nigeria's public university students pay a minimal yearly tuition fee of about \$25 to \$75 yearly, for a period of 4 to 5 years to earn a competitive degree – an insignificant figure compared to what is obtainable in other parts of the world. Contrastingly, countries like the UK and USA require students to take on substantial student loans in order to finance their tertiary education.

Looking at the net migration figures, the population of Nigerians in the UK is still a fractional and insignificant figure compared to countries like India, Ukraine, Pakistan, and Poland. Latest figures published by the UK authorities showed that Nigeria is ranked in 7th place in the net migration index.

Considering the cost of living abroad, as well as the tax burden and educational expenses abroad, it is evident that Nigeria has provided a facilitating platform for success. Nigerians and Africans, when abroad, often excel and achieve extraordinary feats, owing their success to the foundation laid in Nigeria.

So, in the grand scheme of things, the favourable immigration policies, the diplomatic ties Nigeria has built with several countries of the world, the education qualification, work experience, information, and exposure that Nigerians are a beneficiary of, were all made possible by the foundation and groundwork that Nigeria laid over the years.

Now, this article piece is not pontificating that the situation of Nigeria is thriving or that the country economy is all fine and dandy. No! It only aims to set the records straight and establish that the narrative has been brandished and misrepresented by not only the media to sell their stories, but also by some Nigerians in the diaspora who only seek to make worse of the current situation.

Yes, the country is not working as it should, but it is essential to establish that the situation is not as dire as it has been painted to be.

The Upsides to the Great 'Japa' movement No one seem to be Talking About.

In July 2023, Peter Gregory Obi, the presidential candidate for the Labour Party

and former governor of Anambra state, expressed his endorsement of the movement stating how it will impact the nation's economy. His core belief is well underscored in his statement that "our brain drain today will be our brain gain tomorrow".

He made this statement to corroborate the sentiments of tech mogul, Bill Gates, who during an interactive session with innovators stated that the 'Japa' movement was good and healthy for Nigeria as their knowledge, experience and resources will be critical in building the New Nigeria. This is currently what is obtained in China, India, Ireland, and other developing countries. The assertions from these two prominent figures are a good signal of the potential fortune that the 'Japa' movement could bring.

So, while we wait for those fortunes, let us explore the often-overlooked upsides of this movement and discover how it might eventually work to the benefit of our beloved homeland.

I. Global Opportunities for our Professional Talents

The movement will afford our professional talents the opportunity to access globally recognized and financially rewarding work opportunities that are not readily available in the Nigeria labour market.

Cutting-edge fields such as Robotics, Stem-cell research, Blockchain Technology, Artificial Intelligence, Bio-medical engineering, Astrophysics and Space technology can become an avenue for them to not only arm themselves with great experience and work pay, but also reinforce the remarkable brilliance and drive of the Nigerian people. These guys could emerge as pioneers in these global fields and ultimately channeling their expertise towards national development.

II. Foreign Remittances and Economic Growth

According to UK immigration authorities, over \$17.6 billion in foreign remittances were sent to Nigerians by our brothers and sisters living in the diaspora in 2021 alone. The foreign remittance is sure to significantly benefit the Nigerian governments and contribute to the nation's GDP as this monies will go into various areas of the economy in terms of expenditure, savings, business ventures and capital investment, all adding to the growth and development of the nation's economy.

III. Job Opportunities and Unemployment Reduction

The departure of Nigerian professionals who experienced career boredom, exhaustion, and the inability to move ahead in their career, will create a void that will demand filling. This vacuum will automatically create job opportunities to suitably qualified applicants who are unemployed or underemployed and by long-term implications, help reduce the unemployment rate and the unemployment gap in the nation's labour market.

IV. Improved Working Conditions and Competitive Markets

With this mad rush to emigrate as well as the knowledge and exposure of how foreign companies treat their employees, big businesses and corporations are now being forced to meet global standards and benchmarks by improving their working conditions and salary structures. This paradigm shift will help in improving the welfare of working professionals in Nigeria.

In furtherance to that, the movement has heralded and ushered a paradigm shift in the hiring requirements of employees. Now, hiring parameters will emphasize on work ethic and skillset over traditional academic credentials. Job applicants, regardless of their degree classification, can well be considered for roles that were previously restricted to only those with higher academic grades.

V. Government Inducement for Change

The 'Japa' trend, which is majorly an indictment of the Nigerian failing economy atmosphere, will act as a catalyst for government to act and do the needful. The fear of losing the nation's best brains and talents prompts the government to take essential steps to address the root causes and ensure the retention of our valuable human resources.

The Japa Movement Could Be Our Silver Lining.

Nigerians are known for their hard work, productivity, industry, professionalism, and a drive to succeed – attributes that contribute to enhancing Nigeria's global image and brand. While the short-term effects of the 'Japa' movement may create turbulence in sectors like health, technology, academia, and science; the long-term potential it hold can very well be the turning point the Nigerian economy desperately needs.

It is essential to note that reportedly, 91% of Nigerians living in the diaspora remain connected to the homeland. Majority of them have undertaken various charitable and non-charitable initiatives to improve the socio-economic atmosphere in Nigeria. These endeavors include business ventures, capital

investment, and socio-humanitarian efforts. Though they appear physically distant from the country, their hearts and love for Nigeria remain strong.

It is important that we remember the historical precedents of the '*Great China Movement*' and the '*Great India Movement*'. Both countries experienced and are still experiencing mass exodus of their citizens, but today, they emerged as great economies, with their citizens in the diaspora playing a crucial role in their development. The implication is clear – the Nigerians in diaspora will be instrumental in driving progress and advancements in various fields and sectors of government.

Let's also face this undebatable fact — Nigerians in diaspora harbour an innate longing to return home. The unique freedom and carefree lifestyle offered in Nigeria cannot be obtained anywhere else in the world. In fact, some Nigerians who are now abroad actually regret the move. This is as a result of the unanticipated challenges and gruelling experience that they faced when they got there. Those who couldn't secure their desired job roles were forced to settle for menial, and odd jobs just to meet up with their living expenses.

Others are in great distress due to the cultural shock they are forced to grapple with. The heartbreaking story of Sylvia Obianuju Chikwendu on TikTok, who tearfully recounted her struggles with the loneliness she endures since she relocated to Canada is one that resonate deeply in our hearts.

Furthermore, the burden of remitting a sizable portion of their hard-earned income to foreign tax authorities, due to higher tax that is obtained abroad is something that does not sit well with many Nigerians. Aside that, the very fact that there exists only a tiny window of opportunity for Nigerians in diaspora to showcase their entrepreneurial acumen and engage in business ventures, will further drive their desire to return.

Final Thoughts: There's No Place Like Home.

I believe it was Oliver Wendell Holmes Snr. who said that '*Where we love is home – home that our feet may leave, but not our hearts*'

Indeed, there is no place like home. Majority of Nigerians living abroad have indicated their readiness to come back to Nigeria after making their exploits overseas and they plan on coming back with a wealth of experience and a determination to contribute significantly to national development.

Their involvement and commitment to the betterment of Nigeria is evident in their influence during the #EndSARS Protest in 2020 and also, their mobilization efforts during the 2023 general elections.

To this end, the burden rests on the government's shoulder to create a welcoming environment to accelerate their return. Achieving this will entail implementing favorable laws and policies to attract foreign direct investment and increasing the ease and convenience of conducting businesses in the country. Improving the nation's ease of doing business will be pivotal in scaling enterprises and will ultimately attract creative minds and top talents to return and contribute their quota to nation's development.

One undeniable truth is that no matter how far one travels, there is truly no place like home. Even as our people physically move, their hearts remain tethered to the homeland. So, all those aspiring to 'Japa', we wish them nothing but the very best in their exploits. We hope they become great ambassadors of the beloved homeland and when the time is right, we do hope that they '*Jakpada*' (meaning to '*return home*', as said in Yoruba). We hope to see them bring back their bounties and reestablishing their roots towards the continued growth and development of the motherland!

To close, let the resonant words of Peter Gregory Obi resonate deeply in our hearts: *"Nigeria will grow and develop on all fronts when we build the new Nigeria that prioritizes investment in education, health, and support for small businesses, guarantees respect for the rule of law, security of lives and properties, and unity of the nation...then our diasporan Nigerians around the world will return home with their global training, skills, and resources, to immeasurably contribute to building a New and better Nigeria. We will not give up on our dreams for the New Nigeria."*

References

□ 'Japa' Syndrome: Legitimacy Crisis, Emigration and Public Discontent in Nigeria.

<https://oxfordpoliticalreview.com/2023/05/08/japa-syndrome-legitimacy-crisis-emigration-and-public-discontent-in-nigeria/>

□ Japa Syndrome in Nigeria: Understanding Brain Drain, Brain Gain, and Diaspora Money Remittances.

<https://www.opinionnigeria.com/japa-syndrome-in-nigeria-understanding-brain-dr>

[ain-brain-gain-and-diaspora-money-remittances-by-aliyu-tanimu/](https://www.channelstv.com/2023/06/22/japa-our-brain-drain-will-be-brain-gain-to-morrow-obi-agrees-with-bill-gates/)

□ Japa: Our Brain Drain Will Be Brain Gain Tomorrow, Obi Agrees with Bill Gates – Vanguard Newspapers.

<https://www.channelstv.com/2023/06/22/japa-our-brain-drain-will-be-brain-gain-to-morrow-obi-agrees-with-bill-gates/>

□ Nigerians and the Japa Syndrome – Punch Newspapers.

<https://punchng.com/nigerians-and-the-japa-syndrome/>

By Adekunle Olajide

Adekunle Olajide, Director of Editorial Boards, The Lawrit Journal of Law ~ researcher, and writer of topical issues that revolves on not only the policies of the Nigerian Government but also the entire Nigerian polity in general.