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# AN HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS OF NIGERIANS IN DIASPORA TOWARDS NATION BUILDING AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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## Abstract.

*The paper discusses the historical explanation of the problems and prospects of Nigerians in Diaspora in socio-economic and political development of Nigeria, their efforts towards Nation building and various policies, programmes and association formulated at enforcing peace, creating the opportunities and encouraging local based investment at the grassroots level. In the process of analyzing this, it provides a historical background of Diasporas dated to Atlantic slave trade era to the contemporary times. It also went a step further to identifying some specific programmes towards development. Nevertheless, it identifies paradigm shift associated with Diaspora in the contemporary times such as Brain drain syndrome, migration vogue, human trafficking and many other negative effect of migration wave to overseas countries. The paper concludes by supporting the view that Nigerian Diaspora had done more good than evil towards Nation's economic empowerment and political liberalization. Hence, Nigerian government should be encouraged to rise to their responsibility towards building a virile and stable economy and enabling environment that could attract Nigerian foreign based back home. The work adopts descriptive and analytical method at explaining the major conceptual framework by using secondary sources such as relevant textbooks, journals, internet information.*

Key words: Overview, Nigerian Diaspora, Nation building, National development

## Historical Background of Nigerian Diaspora

According to Neville Dawis (1977) the origin of Diaspora could be dated back to Mediterranean slave trade across the Sahara to the Mediterranean world. This was then the only source through which African peoples were dispersed all over the world. It is undisputed that some voluntary migrations might have taken place before the era of slave trade and have certainly been going on since the abolition of slave trade. Oni, Gupta, Omoniyi and Awonusi (2004) as quoted in Shenge's book opine that the dispersion started in 1445 by the Portuguese. The Portuguese institutionalized the trade by setting up the fort off the Mauritanian coast from which to trade in slaves. Domestic slave had earlier survived and used in intensive agriculture especially the production of sugarcane in Europe. The demand for slaves as cheap labour increased with the breakthrough in sugar production across Europe. Slavery also gained increased momentum with the spread of sugar plantations westwards through the Mediterranean to Atlantic Islands and ultimately to the Americans.

Direct shipment of slaves to American began in 1532 and by the late 16<sup>th</sup> century almost 80 percent of all slaves from West African were taken to America especially Brazil for its vast sugar plantation. Blackwell in his own position

dated Nigerian Diaspora back to pre-colonial era. In his work he commented thus: "The International Migration of Nigeria could be dated back to pre-colonial era. Amidst mixed feeling of tears and separation from family they had no hope of homecoming. The extradition and motive was purely borne out of sheer exploitation on the part of the colonial master who shipped them away to far countryside abroad. This was effectively begun with the Western Sudanese merchants along the Saharan route which was best expressed as Trans-Saharan Trade between 14<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century."

The Trans Atlantic slave trade however marked the significant milestone in the forced movement of Nigerians to the new world. Babawale (2005) opines that the dispersion of Africans must of necessity patronize if only briefly the history of Atlantic slave trade for its far reaching implications on the life and progress of Africa and its people for its potential significance in shaping Africa's development. Scholars believe that slave trade act altered the continent course of development and that could not be glossed over in Diaspora discourse hence Babawale (2005) agrees that it is logical to treat the slave trade as the origin of Diaspora. Inikori (1998) also traced the origin of Diaspora to the

era of slave trade, he remarks that "the slave trade from Black Africa to outside world began with the trade across the Saharan to the Mediterranean world broadly defined to include the whole of the Muslim world (North of Sahara) to the new world. The European immigrants to the new world were not preparing to put up with wage labour in plantation.

In this way, the exploitation by the Colonialists (of the African resources) from the 16thc onward came to depend almost entirely on the employment of Black Slave labour thus; the expansion of mining and agriculture production in the Atlantic and Indian Ocean territories was accompanied by an ever growing demand for Black slaves from Africa. From the different views as shown by the scholars, the origin of Diaspora was traced to Atlantic Slave Trade. Also, Blackwell' position was in line with Babawale's view.

### Conceptual Framework

It is important to relate this work with relevant theories so as to acknowledge previous works done in this related areas and provides opportunities for the paper to either challenge or uphold based on new information. According to Behrendt's work in his attempt to find definition to Diaspora compared African Diasporas to the nightmares of the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

Howard uses the term Diaspora synonymously with dispersion from original homeland often traumatically to two or more foreign regions. Blackwell in his work as cited by Nworah. He defines the term Diaspora as given by African Union (AU) as thus "The African Diaspora consists of peoples of African origin living outside the continent irrespective of their citizenship or nationality and who are willing to contribute to the development of the continent and the building of the African Union (AU)." In the light of AU definition Akinrinade and Ogen (2004) positioned Nigerian Diaspora thus; "Nigeria Diaspora could be referred to as those Nigerians living outside the country and who are desirous or already contributing to the development of Nigeria". According to Babawale (2008) the term Diaspora refers to the spreading of people from natural group or culture to other areas and further define African Diaspora as the totality of people of African descent resident outside the shores of the continent of Africa irrespective of the manner of their onward migration be it forced or voluntary

and at different point in time. He went further to calibrate the Diaspora era into phases: The first phases of the movement was related back to the origin Diaspora, Africans were compelled into bondage and forced labour in Europe, Americas and the Caribbean to contribute to the realization of other people's dreams. The second phase was when Africans emigrated willingly to fulfill their own dreams and to seek ways of improving their own life chances and within the second category are (I) circumstantial exodus of Africans those that felt disappointed from their respective home fronts as a result of the feeling that their dreams could not be fulfilled at home. The contemporary Diaspora fell within the second broad category. Also, for the purpose of this paper different categories of Diaspora were identified as given by different scholars. Cortins (1984) was able to identify Trade Diaspora (those that went abroad purposely to trade). Zeleza (2004) discusses on Academic Diaspora while Butler (2001) analysed Cultural expatriate and Riggs (1999) explained macro, micro or Overlapping Diaspora.<sup>12</sup> The nomenclature exposed different factors or reasons that took people away from their fatherland. Some Nigerians went abroad in quest for more knowledge; some are there to trade while many others went for greener pasture.

In 1791 there was a successful major slave revolt in human history and many of the slaves who could not trace their place of origin got settled and adjusted to the new found environment. Samuel Ajayi Crowther was among the fortunate ones that could trace his home back to Nigeria amidst many others who could not have sufficient historical facts as regards the origin of their progenitors.

### Nigerian Diaspora during Colonial Era

The outbreak of Industrial Revolution in Britain and its extension to other Western Europe in the 18<sup>th</sup> century brought a turn around to the relevance of human resources. Machine replaced human labour. Western Europe was in dire need of labour market for its finished product and also it needed raw materials for its industries hence, slave trade was totally abolished and the exploitation wore a new outlook. According to Ehinmore (1999) Economic motives was the most fundamental factor that brought Europeans to West Africa.

The priorities of British policy toward tropical Africa indicated that West Africa would guarantee returns for their investment than the

other parts of Africa. Nigeria became one of the focuses of the Western world. So, with the abolition of Slave trade, following the Industrial Revolution in Europe there was need to exploit the hinterland of Africa for the much needed raw materials such as palm-oil, cotton, rubber, groundnut and so on for their industries.

Nigeria became a centre of attraction among other African countries. As the Trans Atlantic slave trade marked the significant milestone in the forced movement of Nigerians to the New World, the Colonial era also witnessed mass labour migration required for plantation, mines and cheap domestic labours. Nigerians migrated first to Western Europe and later to United States also became a destination point primarily for the pursuit of higher education. Some of the Nigerian Nationalists were beneficiary of these; among whom were: Nnamdi Azikwe, Obafemi Awolowo, Herbert Macaulay, Sir Ladoke Akintola and host of others. Some of these migrants decided to stay back even when the original idea was for them to return to Nigeria to take the position left by the departing British colonial administrators. Post independence Nigeria continued to experience quest for higher education abroad and they search for greener pasture continued.

#### **Contemporary Nigerian Diaspora**

The current trend in Nigeria daily gives more room for increase in number of diaspora hence could be referred to as Diaspora age as supported by Akinrinade and Ogen (2012). While Mberu (2005) declares that about 120 million people migrated from one country to another annually. This could be as a result of quest for satisfaction, peace, sound standard of living and effective education and this has given concentration to Diaspora historiography and discourses which have grown exponentially in recent times. Research shows that those that left Nigeria in the 60s, 70s and 80s was solely for the purpose of acquiring Western Education but modern day emigrants was in search of greener pasture, economic survival and not educational survival as in early days. This may not be totally true, as there are still few ones that are away to overseas countries purposely purely for academic reasons, due to epileptic academic calendar being run by the Nigerian conventional Universities.

The Economic downturn in the country in the early 80s due to collapse of crude oil prices alongside with political violence and

ethnic rivalries exacerbated the exodus of Nigerian abroad. Today the rate of migration has increased as Nigerians moved daily to Anglo-Saxon countries such as Germany, France, Netherlands, Belgium Spain, Italy and Gulf States. Within Africa, Nigerian students have picked interest in South Africa, Ghana and Botswana.

Some highly skilled Nigerian migrants have even found booming economy of South Africa a convenient alternative to Europe, North America and Gulf States while many are daily seeking permanent residency. Rena Singer(2002) commented that 15 million Nigerians (more than 1 in 10 Nigerians) live abroad. This figure was validated by other sources such as African Action. Some researchers comment that no one know numbers but it is estimated that as many as 15 million Nigerians lived outside the country, in neighboring countries and across the African continent, in Britain and throughout the Commonwealth, in other European countries, and in many Asian countries as well. These Nigerians are referred to as Nigerian in Diaspora and are actively engaged in different professions.

#### **Prospects, Problems and Challenges Confronting Nigerian Diaspora**

This work holistically examines various challenges faced by Nigerians in Diaspora and on the other hand, developmental projects and agents that have contributed to nation building and national development they have brought to various sectors of their homeland.

#### **Problems**

**Brain drain Syndrome:** Many of the Nigerian skilled manpower have been lost to the developed world, a phenomenon popularly referred to as brain drain syndrome. Babawale (2005) also supports that contemporary statistics on Human capital loss to the rest of the world are scarce but worrisome. Nigeria has lost and continuing to lose an appreciable percentage of its human resource and skilled personnel at an alarming rate. It was estimated that 20,000 doctors, University lecturers, Engineers and other professionals have been leaving the continent since 1990. Labour migration from Nigeria has become increasingly feminine. Nigerian female Nurses and Doctors have been recruited in large numbers to work in Europe especially in UK, US and Saudi Arabia. The trafficking of female Nigerian sex workers mainly to Italy, Spain and

Netherlands, Belgium, UK and Saudi Arabia has received substantial attention in recent times.

Generation born in the new lands faced with the issue of double identity, as they identified with both Nigerian citizens and European citizens. The Diasporas are also faced with a troubled relationship with host societies thus suggesting lack of acceptance. For example in China Institutional racism hinders professionals. Recently In China some Nigerians were jailed for different offences and many others were sent back to Nigeria.

Nigerian government has been spending fortune to train their Nationals without reaping the benefits of their investment except to watch these nationals contribute to the growth and development of other countries outside the continent.

The post independence paradigmatic problem experienced in Nigeria was one of the discouraging factors for the large turnout of the people to overseas countries. Many of them went through the desert to experience hardship while some could not make way through but died in the desert. Thousands of Nigerians seek refuge and asylum each year and some also migrate illegally, transiting through North Africa and then crossing the Mediterranean to Europe. Poverty drives much of this movement; more than 70 percent of Nigerians live below the national poverty line.

#### **Nigerians in Diaspora and the Prospects for National Development**

In the recent past, advocacy against brain-drain syndrome was in vogue. Nigeria was one of the nations that were largely dominated by the negative impact of the loss of skilled manpower to the developed world. However, growing evidences have shown that International migration have been having some positive developmental effects on socio-economic and political development of Nigeria. Research has shown that Nigerians in Diaspora have emotional attachment to the homeland and this has enabled them embarked on various developmental projects towards building a virile and economically stable nation.

Some highly skilled Nigerians resident abroad are returning to the country or making frantic efforts to have a stake in the country's economy. Diasporas help to establish and set up local business, boost social infrastructure, promote trade and enterprise as well as the sustenance of democratic principle.

Members of the Nigerian Diasporas are heavily involved in transnational activities that are capable of effectively integrating their countries of origin with their host countries. This is enabled them become the veritable agents of poverty reduction and also a key player in the process of Africa's socio-economic transformation and development thereby integrating African continent into an increasingly globalised world.

In the aspect of Social welfare, Rena singer (2002) remarked that they also tied in many ways to influence the social, political and economic development of Nigeria. They believed they should be committed to the maintenance or restoration of their original homeland and also to its safety and prosperity and to continue to relate personally or vicariously to their homeland in one way or the other. Money sent home by Nigerians living abroad are spent on food, education and health needs of the sender's relatives as well as on investments in real estate, stock exchanges transport and so on. Sometimes remittances are in kind, for example consumable and inconsumable objects such as clothes, cars and electronics are sent to friends and relatives. Due to the dismal state of Nigerian higher education system, Nigerian Diaspora has contributed immensely towards the Education survival of the nation. Universities in UK, North America often embarked on recruitment drives for Nigerian states.

One of the credible strategies for progress embarked upon by Nigerian Diaspora was organization of various associations. Among such is 'Nigeria Diaspora Organisation' (NIDO). NIDO is an umbrella organization for all Nigerian professional groups in America. As one of the agent that contribute to Nation Building in Nigeria, it provides a sophisticated and highly regarded information tool to enable linkages of Nigerian skills and expertise abroad with Nigeria's government industry and of academic sectors, to meet their workforce, training and economic development needs.

Nigerian Diaspora also helps in driving global capital into Nigeria thus creating opportunities for Nigerian business to deepen their access to global capital. It also facilitated US/Nigeria Business, Trade and Investment Forum linking US Investors with Nigerian Businessmen and the Government.

Culture has also been identified as one of the strongest link between Nigerian and the

Diaspora. The dispersion of people of Africa descent has resulted in the dispersion of African cultures all over the world. CBAAC is another centre that was borne out of effort to sustain the relevance of FESTAC 77 which brought all African Black together under the umbrella of propagating African Arts and Cultures.

#### Measures to curtail Nigerian influx of Emigration to Overseas

The migration wave of Nigerians to overseas countries has both positive and negative advantages but, from this descriptive analysis Nigeria stands to gain more from Diasporas the Government could fashion out modalities towards the growth and development of the Country and by improving on the followings:

- Provide enabling environment for the citizens
- the poor professional working conditions that persist in Nigeria should be looked into
- the state of economy should be improved by providing basic amenities such as good road, transport, and communication, address the pitiable state of infrastructures.
- focus on realistic 'brain gain' initiatives.

- play good role in maintaining good relationship with the Nigerian Diaspora. Take lead in facilitating mutual co-operation between Nigerians, at home and Nigerian abroad by encouraging her Nationals overseas to organize and use their numerical strength, technical expertise, global standard institution, growing socio-economic cum political leverage and wealth to work not only for Nigeria but the whole of Africa.

#### Conclusion

This paper has critically examines the origin of Diaspora by tracing the history from Atlantic Slave era down to post independence era to the Contemporary times. Research findings show that Nigeria is one of these developing countries with high migrant or Diaspora all over the world. Findings have also revealed that Nigerian Diaspora has played vital roles towards building a virile and stable Nation, Nevertheless the Government should provide atmosphere of tolerance and physical security that could encourage Nigerians to stay rather than wishing to stay away.

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