

Religious Ethical Dimension to the Mass Exodus of Nigerian Youths to the Western World

Ajani Tunde **OLANREWAJU**
Department Christian Religious Studies
Adeyemi Federal University of Education, Ondo
Email: lanrebrobre@gmail.com

Introduction

Migration is a phenomenon that is as old as man. Man has always moved from one point to the other. In search of food, shelter, and other basic means of livelihood. Man has been programmed to always seek for greener pasture, to seek for a means to better his current condition of living. This is to say, many times the point a man is leaving to seek a better one could be good enough for some other person. In other words, as much as most migrations are economic oriented and motivated, some are instigated by some other factors.

In recent times, Nigeria has experienced a huge surge in the number of young people traveling out of the country. This has been traced to the employment-driven nature of Nigerian emigration, dwindling economic realities, and social upheavals. The new trend of migration called Japaism in street parlance has seen the influx of young Nigerian emigrants into China, India, and other Asian countries that hitherto had very few Nigerian citizens (Isiugo-Abanihe, 2016).

Nigeria is currently experiencing brain draining as a result of this malady and mad rush to foreign countries. A true picture of how dire the situation is, was captured in the communique sent to

the Governor of Ondo State by agitating Nigerian Medical Association (NMA). The association noted with concern the continuous shortage of manpower and modern medical equipment at various State hospitals. Stressing that there were only 22 resident doctors at UNIMED Teaching Hospital compared to the previous figure of 150 resident doctors before (David, 2024).

Emigration has been examined from different perspectives and dimensions over the years. However, little attention has been paid to the religious ethical dimensions of emigration. Nigeria has three major religions; Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religion. These religions have their ethical teachings that are expected to be considered before considering migration (Japa). These prompted this research work, because there are obvious reasons to give a closer examination to the process of emigration by Nigerian youths. The trend of Japa has been considered to be faulted with underhand and sly practices that negate some of the teachings of religion. Published peer-reviewed journals, abstracts, newspaper articles, gray literature (technical reports, government documents, reports, etc.), books, and Internet articles were reviewed. Here we broadly examine the prevalence of migration among youths in Nigeria and the economic implications of migration. Utilitarianism has been employed as the theoretical framework on which this research work is based.

Overview of Migration Trend in Nigeria

Intra Africa Migration

Migration has been part of Nigeria's culture, even before independence and the inception of Nigeria as a state. Nigeria experienced its fair share of slavery like most West African countries. Through slavery, which is the result of inter-ethnic conflicts and warfare, many people were forcefully moved from one place to another (Adejumoke, Ikwuyatum, & Abejide, 2008). More than 12 million Africans were exported to Europe and the Americas (Mberu & Pongou, 2010).

After the abolishment of slave trade, before the independence, Nigeria's migration trend became intra-African migration. This was

when many Nigerians moved to other African countries to trade. Countries like Benin, Côte d’Ivoire, Mali, Ghana, and Sudan became hosts to Nigerian traders (IOM, 2017). For instance, Ejjigbo-Nigerians have had a long-distance experience of trade relations with the people of Côte d’Ivoire. Trans-border movements, for purposes of trade and/or work have become the most widespread pattern, especially since the colonial and immediate post-colonial era, in parts of West Africa (Adeniran, 2020). Historically, before the discovery of Côte d’Ivoire as a hub of trade, the Ejjigbo migrants then first settled in the republics of Benin, Togo, and Ghana.

Asiwaju (1992), opined that such migrants’ networks in West Africa have contributed in no little measure to the dynamism of a series of market centers, ‘which normally attract business transactions from remarkably extensive areas without much regard for international boundaries’. As Ejjigbo indigenes flourish greatly in Côte d’Ivoire, the development keeps motivating many still living in the town to also relocate, in the face of declining basic social amenities and little hope in their home country. More than 2 million registered Nigerians, of Ejjigbo extraction, are currently residing in Côte d’Ivoire. Contributing greatly to the Gross Domestic Product of Côte d’Ivoire. There are big business concerns and Ivorian organisations headed by the Ejjigbo people (Ojoye, 2019). This could also be said about the Ogbomoso people, though their migration exploit could not be compared to that of their Ejjigbo counterpart.

Intra National Migration

The dominant narratives surrounding contemporary migration often focus on the movement from developing countries to wealthier nations in Europe, North America, and Australasia. However, it is important to recognize that the majority of global migration actually occurs within countries, rather than between them (Adeniran, 2020), especially from the rural to the urban. According to Aliyu and Amadu (2017), Between 1952 and 1991, urban population grew at annual average of 4.5%; by 1991, there were 359 towns compared to 56 and 182, respectively, in 1952/53 and 1963. Three cities of more than 1 million inhabitants (Lagos, Ibadan, and Kano) emerged and

together accounted for about 10% of the national population by 1991. As a result of these developments about one in three Nigerians (36%) lived in cities by 1991 compared to one in five in 1960.

Apart from the economic and lack of basic amenities in the rural communities, another factor that causes intra state migration of people in Nigeria is conflicts. One of the most significant Igbo displacements occurred as a result of the Hausa-Fulani group's mass massacres of Igbo inhabitants in northern Nigeria during the power struggle between the north and the south, and the civil war that followed between the newly formed Biafran state and the rest of Nigeria.

individuals in Nigeria and abroad in the 1960s and 1970s (SIHMA, 2014). Early in the new millennium, a significant ethnic war broke out between Hausa-Fulani herdsmen and Mambila farmers, forcing the Hausa-Fulani to evacuate in large numbers. Another prominent conflict that has led to migration within Nigerian state, is the emergence of the Islamic groups, Izala and the Boko Haram, aiming to eradicate Western civilization and establish an Islamic theocracy in Nigeria.

The livelihood of thousands was devastated as a result of the continuous battles in the northern part of the country, as well as the ongoing clashes between government forces and youth militias in the southeast and the Niger Delta, resulting in several deaths, injuries, and/or displacements (Mberu & Pongou, 2010). Several displaced persons have moved from these volatile areas to a seemingly more peaceful place.

Contemporary Trend of Migration by Youths “JAPA”

The dawn of independence brought the drift of migration to the Western world, especially Europe and United States (De Haas, 2006). These set of Nigerian Migrants went for studies and highly skilled training. many of them are elites and children of the elites that could afford to send their children overseas study. This was the period of “culture of professional migration” (Mberu & Pongou, 2010). However, these are migrants who only migrated with the mind of returning to their home country one day.

The current trend of migration by Nigerian youths also called Japa in local parlance, is a form of migration to another prosperous country, without the mind of returning. Japa is a Yoruba word meaning “run or escape”. It is now one of the most popular words in Nigeria especially among the youths that are disenchanted with the country. According to Bernard (2022), Japa as a colloquial has its origins in the 2018 Naira Marley song of the same name, the word has shifted into the lexicon of Nigeria’s young demographic as a marker of discontent.

According to the Nigeria Social Cohesion Survey, a recent study, it has been found that seven out of 10 Nigerians express their willingness to migrate to other countries for various reasons. Additionally, a significant number of individuals have already achieved success in their migration endeavors. Unfortunately, the desire to leave Nigeria is on the rise among both young and old individuals. The current net migration rate for Nigeria stands at -0.273 per 1000 population, indicating that more people are leaving the country than entering it. This trend is distressing as it points towards a concerning brain drain situation in Nigeria. It may be necessary to urgently address this issue and take appropriate actions to prevent further negative impacts on the nation’s development and well-being (Oludotun, 2023). This hunger to migrate has reached an alarming crescendo, which was not a few years back. A staggering 69% of Nigerians would relocate out of the country with their families if given the chance, a 2022 survey by the Africa Polling Institute found. Whereas only 39% were willing to emigrate in 2019 according to the same poll.

Unfortunately, this “mad rush” to leave the country is more prominent among the youth. According to a CNN report, this particular wave is hollowing out the upwardly mobile middle class, especially in the mid-20s to late-40s age range. An entire cottage industry has sprung up to support those who want to emigrate from Nigeria. Immigration consultants and agencies charge thousands of dollars to offer relocation advice, visa processing services, and immigration routes (Larry Madowo, Bethlehem Feleke, and Fridah Okutoyi, 2023).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical frame work maximized for this research is Rule Utilitarianism: This theory focuses on the distinction between moral and immoral choices. It claims that people should follow whichever moral rules that will have the best overall impact. Under this view, the moral choice in each situation is not determined by the concrete results of that specific choice, but by the long-term effects that would occur if people generally followed whatever rule the person uses to make the choice. For a rule utilitarian, the rules that are viewed as morally good are those that add happiness to the world and decrease pain and suffering (Pollens-Dempsey, 2023).

In the context of this research work, a rule utilitarian analysis would involve evaluating whether certain immigration policies or practices maximize overall societal welfare. This could include taking into consideration factors such as economic growth, cultural diversity, social integration, and overall well-being. While, also considering Religious beliefs, teachings, and values can certainly influence individual perspectives on migration and shape opinions on issues related to loyalty, patriotism, Parental responsibility, human rights, social justice, and hospitality towards strangers.

Religion and Emigration

Religion and emigration can be intertwined in various ways. Religious beliefs and practices can influence an individual or a community's decision to migrate. The history of Nigeria highlights the presence of three major religions - Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religion. Significantly, these religions have a shared characteristic – migration. Migration plays a crucial role in their development and establishment. In essence, the foundations of these religions are deeply intertwined with migratory movements throughout history.

Christianity

Migration has played a significant role in the history and spread of Christianity. From its origins in ancient Israel, the patriarchs of

Judaism; Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. According to the traditional view, Abraham began his migration from Ur in the southern Mesopotamian plain. Abraham and his kin probably traveled up the Euphrates River to Haran. During the winter the clan moved the animals south into the Negeb and the marginal wilderness areas where winter rains provided grass for grazing. During the hot summer months, the patriarchs sought relief from the heat as well as grazing lands in the higher elevation of the mountains. The periodic migrations of the patriarchal clan match the pattern of small herdsman moving their encampments seeking seasonal grazing lands (ANDREWS, 2022).

When Isaac was born to Abraham and Sarah in their old age, he too became part of this migratory lifestyle. In Genesis 26:1-6, there is a famine in Canaan which prompts Isaac to migrate to Gerar in Philistia (modern-day Gaza Strip). This migration was driven by the need for food security during times of scarcity.

During his stay in Gerar, Isaac faced challenges with Abimelech, the king of Gerar. He had conflicts over water rights as he dug wells that were eventually claimed by local herders. Despite these difficulties, God blessed Isaac abundantly for his faithfulness.

Eventually, after many years of wandering and settling temporarily in different places like Beersheba (Genesis 26:23-25), Isaac returned to Hebron where his father Abraham had lived (Genesis 35:27). He died there at an old age.

The story of Isaac's migration highlights themes such as obedience to God's call, trust amid adversity, and reliance on divine provision. It also reinforces the idea that migration can be a means through which God fulfills His promises and establishes His people in new lands.

Jacob's migration was necessitated because of the conflict between him and his brother. He fled from his brother Esau after deceiving him to gain their father's blessing. In Genesis 28, Jacob traveled to Haran, where his mother's brother Laban lived. This migration was driven by both fears for his life and his mother's instructions to find a wife among their relatives.

Eventually, after two decades in Haran, God instructed Jacob to

return to Canaan (Genesis 31:3). In Genesis 32-33, we read about Jacob's journey back to Canaan with his wives, children, livestock, and possessions.

One of the most notable migration events in Christianity is the early diaspora of Jewish-Christians following the death of Jesus Christ. As persecution against them increased, many Jewish Christians migrated to different regions, spreading their beliefs and establishing new Christian communities.

Christianity quickly became a global religion through migration and missionary efforts (Little, 2023).

Islam

Migration, or Hijrah, is mentioned in the Quran in several verses. One of the most well-known references to migration is found in Surah Al-Anfal (8:72), where Allah says, "Indeed, those who have believed and emigrated and fought with their wealth and lives in the cause of Allah and those who gave shelter and aided – they are allies of one another."

This verse highlights the importance of migration for the sake of preserving one's faith and fighting for justice. It emphasizes that believers who migrate for their faith will receive support from other believers.

Another reference to migration can be found in Surah Al-Baqarah (2:218), where Allah says, "Indeed, those who have believed and those who have emigrated and fought in the cause of Allah - those expect the mercy of Allah." This verse highlights that migrating for the sake of Allah's cause can bring about His mercy.

The Quran also mentions migration as a means to escape persecution or oppression. In Surah An-Nisa (4:97), it states, "Indeed, those whom the angels take [in death] while wronging themselves - [the angels] will say, 'In what [condition] were you?' They will say, 'We were oppressed in the land.' The angels will say, 'Was not the earth of Allah spacious [enough] for you to emigrate therein?' For such men their refuge is Hell – and evil it is as a destination."

Therefore, Migration is fundamental in Islam. Prophet Muhammad’s migration (622 CE) from Mecca to Yathrib (Medina) upon invitation in order to escape persecution. After arriving, Muhammad negotiated the Constitution of Medina with the local clans, thereby establishing the Muslim community as a sociopolitical entity for the first time (Zeidan, 2023). Hijrah which was a form of migration by the Prophet is the most popular migration in Islam tradition.

The migration of Prophet Muhammad marked a turning point in Islamic history. It established Madinah as the first Islamic state, with Muslims living in peace and practicing their faith freely. This event also led to various political, social, and legal developments that shaped the early Muslim community.

In addition to Prophet Muhammad’s migration, there are other notable migrations in Islamic history. One such migration is that of Muslims fleeing persecution from Makkah to Abyssinia (modern-day Ethiopia) during the early years of Islam. The Christian ruler at that time offered them protection based on their shared belief in monotheism.

Traditionally, Hijrah meant migration from Dar al-Harb to Dar al-Islam. The concept is considered to have been coined by Abu Hanifa (699 – 767AD), founder of the Sunni Hanafi School of fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence). According to the Shafi’i scholar al-Mawardi, after the conquest of Mecca by Muhammad and his companions, Hijrah became an obligation only on those Muslims who are unable to practice their religion. This perception holds that in the time of the Prophet, the execution of religious commandments and duties was the primary objective of Hijrah (migration). The believers were asked to migrate to Medina so that they would avoid the persecutions of the people of Mecca, and the temptation to recant Islam as a result of it. They migrated to learn the laws of Islam from the Prophet himself (Mawardi 1994). Until today, only when it is not possible for Muslims to practise Islam will they be obligated to emigrate from Dar al-Harb (Uberman, M, & Shay, S., 2016).

Another significant migration is known as “Hijrah al-Fardh” (individual migration), which involves individual Muslims leaving

their home countries for various reasons such as seeking education or economic opportunities or escaping oppression. This type of migration has occurred throughout history as Muslims have traveled across continents for different purposes while maintaining their faith.

Africa Traditional Religion

Migration is a significant theme in many African cultures and religions, including those that believe in multiple gods or deities. In various African mythologies, gods are often associated with migration or have stories related to migration.

In some African creation myths, it is believed that the gods themselves migrated from one place to another before settling in their current locations. For example, among the Yoruba people of Nigeria, it is believed that their deities called Orishas migrated from Ile-Ife to establish different kingdoms across the region.

Migration also plays a role in African religious rituals and ceremonies. In certain cultures, people may embark on pilgrimage journeys to sacred sites associated with specific gods or spirits. These journeys often involve physical movement and travel as individuals seek spiritual connection and blessings from these divine beings.

Furthermore, migration can be seen as a symbolic representation of personal growth and spiritual transformation in some African religious beliefs. It is believed that through physical movement and encountering new environments, individuals can gain knowledge, experience personal development, and connect with different aspects of the divine.

Since, Africans are notoriously religious and they carry their religion anywhere they go, it is not a surprise that Africans arriving a new land may accept the established religion of the land but at the same time may retain a few elements of their religion. This is what the African slaves imported into North America to work on plantations did. This could be called “religious syncretism” (Shishima, 2018).

Religious Ethics and Migration in Nigeria

Migration scholars have examined the intersections between religion and migration from disparate theoretical, methodological, and religious perspectives, although, in disciplinary terms, this sub-field has arguably been dominated by social science frameworks. In turn, scholars of religion, theologians, and ethicists have also explored the multiple connections between religion and migration. Thus, the importance of exploring the religious ethical implications of the contemporary trend of migration “Japa”. Japa as a new trend of migration, apart from being a desperate move, it is with the intention of not returning to the homeland. These of course negate some of religious ethics and teachings. These will be examined in this study.

National Loyalty

Certain religious teachings emphasize loyalty to one’s country or nation. Loyalty to a country means being true to that particular geographical /constitutional entity, no matter what Government controls it. Loyalty to a country or nation, separate from loyalty to its government, can be seen as a commitment to the well-being, values, and principles of that nation. It involves a sense of belonging, pride in its achievements, and a willingness to contribute positively to its progress. The holy book of the Christians has this

My child, never forget the things I have taught you. Store my commands in your heart. If you do this, you will live many years, and your life will be satisfying. **Never let loyalty and kindness leave you!** Tie them around your neck as a reminder. Write them deep within your heart (Proverbs 3:1-3).

This loyalty can stem from a deep connection to the culture, history, and people of the nation, and a desire to see it thrive and prosper. It’s important to note that loyalty to a nation can coexist with critical thinking and constructive engagement with its government and policies (Desai, 2022).

So, the frantic efforts of Nigerian youths to leave the shore of Nigeria is a direct differing from the teaching of Christianity. Youths that have been trained by the capital resources of the country, skilled

youths on which the future of the country depends, now move to another foreign country as human resources, to contribute to the national development of their adopted country. While the is country is being made impoverished by lack of professionals in many fields. According to Larry *et al* (2023), the number of “Worker” visas in the UK issued to Nigerians shot up by 399% comparing 2019 to the year ending September 2022. Statistics Canada also reported that Nigeria is the 5th largest source of immigrants for their workforce.

Also, in Islam loyalty to ones’ birth country is sacrosanct. Though loyalty to God (Allah) is second to none. According to Namode (2013), there is no difference between following Islam as a religion and having loyalty to one’s country of residence. Being loyal and having love for one’s country is a part of the Islamic faith. The Quran states, “O ye who believe, obey God and obey the Prophet and obey those in authority from among you” (4:60). This is to show that Islam preaches patriotism and gives the economic development of adherents’ home country a priority. There is no room for economic sabotage of one’s nation in Islam. Which Nigerian youths are unconsciously into through “Japaism”.

Africa traditional religion through many of its moral norms and values would always emphasize the importance of loyalty among its adherents. Loyalty is seen as a vital element in maintaining harmony within these communal relationships. The balance of the society is kept through loyalty to the community and the customs.

In Ifa corpus, which is a collection of sacred texts and teachings in the Yoruba religion of West Africa, Loyalty is a virtue that is emphasized in its teachings, as it is seen as essential for maintaining harmonious relationships within the community and with the divine. Ifa teaches that loyalty should be shown not only to one’s immediate family but also to the extended family, community, and society as a whole. This includes being faithful to one’s responsibilities within these groups and actively contributing to their well-being. Additionally, the loss of skilled professionals can hinder the transmission of cultural practices and indigenous knowledge, potentially eroding the rich tapestry of Nigeria’s cultural heritage (Fasina, 2024). Migrating away from one’s homeland may be viewed

as a betrayal of this loyalty, particularly if it conflicts with patriotic duties or national security considerations.

Religious Duties

In some religions, individuals may have certain obligations or duties to their community or family that could be compromised by migration. For example, leaving one’s community or abandoning family responsibilities may be seen as a violation of one’s religious duty to care for and support their loved ones.

The departure of Nigerian youths due to the Japa Syndrome has a profound impact on family dynamics. The emotional toll on parents, siblings, and extended family members could be immense. Additionally, families are faced with the challenge of adapting to changes in roles and responsibilities, especially when a primary breadwinner leaves. This can lead to increased stress and strained relationships within the family unit and could also impact mental health significantly due to adjustment and adaptation challenges like loneliness, anxiety and depression. Additionally, there is a rise in empty-nest especially with older parents having to now leave alone with their children in faraway foreign lands. This has reduced the social support and daily interaction for parents and further isolates the already ‘isolated nuclear family’. Sometimes these parents (grandparents) are burdened with taking care of their grandchildren.

Honesty

Every religion teaches honesty. Dishonesty is strictly abhorred and frowned upon. This is prevalent in the new trend of migration. Smuggling into Europe by Nigerian youths and through other methods is not in tandem with the teachings of religion. There are many different ways of smuggling migrants; they range from simple to complex, from safe to dangerous and from cheap to very costly. The level of safety and ease of reaching the destination are dependent on the amount of money paid and other inducements (UNODC, 2024). The smuggling of migrants and the activities related to it cost many people their lives and generate billions of dollars in profit

for criminals. They also fuel corruption – through the bribery of officials - and strengthen organized crime in the countries of origin, transit, or destination. There is evidence suggesting that, with the ever-growing interdependence of the global economy, the involvement of criminal groups in the smuggling of migrants is on the rise (ibid).

The desperation of many Nigerian youths has made them throw caution to the wind. Many have resulted in marriage fraud. According to Meagan Neil (2023), Marriage fraud or a sham marriage is a union entered solely to obtain an immigration visa. The usual fact pattern in sham marriages is that noncitizens and U.S. citizens get married under the thought of immigration benefits. They'll meet all the law requirements, including medical tests, licensing, and wedding ceremonies. But the parties do not intend to enter a bona fide marriage and live as a couple. The U.S. citizen is paid to marry the noncitizen to enable them to gain status as a lawful permanent resident.

The height of it was when this desperation and its resulting chaos creeps into the hallow hall of the academics. It was reported that scholars sponsored by the government of Nigeria to study abroad absconded. No one puts better than Elaeze

It is, indeed, difficult to fathom out the reason why persons on government scholarship, who are supposed to be on a mission to acquire more skills to impart both knowledge and character, would permanently bolt out of the country in such a dishonest manner. Some have tended to describe the act in disdainful terms, while others have used hackneyed phrases like “take off” or even “japa”, a word recently added to the lexicon of our local parlance (Elaeze, 2023).

Concluding Remarks

Migration is a universal phenomenon that is not new to Africa and Nigeria as a nation. However, the new strain called Japa has become a syndrome that Nigeria is finding difficult to grapple with.

Going by these effects of Japa on the economic development of the country, family life, and the like. It is safe to say that this new trend of migration, Japa, does not follow rule utilitarianism. Japa

reeks of selfishness, dishonesty, lack of sense of duty to religion and family, and lack of loyalty to the community and the country at large. Their moral choice in this situation is wrong. This is because the long-term effects that would come of this could be worse than any social calamities Nigeria has ever experienced. It is a time bomb ticking. Hence, the need for individuals, corporate bodies, and the government to see it as such. The government should not be carried away by the diaspora remittance. The several million dollars may not be enough to revamp the spots left by these professionals.

There is a need to resuscitate the ‘believe in Nigeria’ slang again. The youths must be made to believe in the project called Nigeria. This would only happen when comprehensive strategies that would address the root causes of Japa are addressed and the provision of viable alternatives for the Nigerian youths is placed on the front burner. Fostering an environment with opportunities and growth must be made imperative.

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