

CHAPTER EIGHT

INTRODUCTION

The main objective of the study was to understand how Cameroonian and Nigerian immigrants experience emigration to South Africa, and how they are affected by this new context. Cameroonian and Nigerian immigrants encounter similar immigration experiences in South Africa, and for many of them, it is not the best of experiences. They entered South Africa with the hope of making life better than they had experienced in their home countries. But, for some of these immigrants, life in South Africa is not as they had anticipated. The socio-economic, cultural and political state of affairs in South Africa makes it difficult for these immigrants to meet up with their goals. To understand these goals, it was appropriate to first find out why these immigrants are attracted to South Africa, and what is forcing them to emigrate from their countries of origins. It was also appropriate to examine and analyse immigrants' interactions; their coping and survival strategies, to better understand how they experience immigration in South Africa. The concluding section of this thesis will provide a summary of my main findings, before coming up with some policy recommendations.

CONCLUSIONS

I found out in this research that, a range of push and pull factors influenced West African immigration to South Africa. Prominent amongst these factors, is political instability, which acts as a push factor in the sub-region. I found out in this study that, coups and military take-over, political marginalisation of particular groups, dictatorship, and intra-state disputes are the major factors pushing Cameroonians and Nigerians out of their countries to South Africa.

Economic and Humanitarian crises in the West African sub-region are also acting as push factors in influencing West African immigration to South Africa. The movement of people world-over because of economic and humanitarian reasons is well known. Examples such as those of Eastern Europeans to Western Europe, from South America to

North America, from North Africa to Western Europe are all classical examples. I observed similarly in this research that poor, unemployed and underemployed Cameroonians and Nigerians in their respective countries come to South Africa with the hope of finding a better economic environment. At this juncture, it is worth noting that while economic hardship in the West African sub-region acts as a push factor of migration, perceived better economic conditions in South Africa simultaneously act as pull factors in influencing West African immigration to South Africa. In addition, geographical proximity between the two sub-regions, economic difficulties in migrating to Europe and the United States, coupled with the high level of refusals of visas by American and Western European embassies, have equally contributed in influencing West African immigration to South Africa.

Communication and technological advances have also played a major role in influencing West African immigration to South Africa. I found in my research that, communication and technological advances influence West African immigration to South Africa from three different perspectives. These include, through exposure over the media of better socio-economic facilities in South Africa, through communication of immigrants to relatives at home using traditional technologies like letter writing and face-to-face contacts, and, communication of immigrants to relatives and friends at home, using new technologies like emails and cell-phones. Communication and technological advances have also reinforced precedence as a factor influencing West African immigration to South Africa. Pioneer West Africans who entered South Africa in the early 1990s prepared the scene for friends and relatives who are prepare to emigrate from their countries. My research findings showed that, such pioneer immigrant population acted as a pull factor, attracting potential Cameroonian and Nigerian migrants from their respective countries into South Africa.

The role of socio-cultural factors in influencing migration is well established (Hussein, 1993). My research findings showed that politically marginalized groupings of Cameroonians and Nigerians have strong incentives to emigrate in search of better opportunities elsewhere. This was reflected in the experiences of the marginalized

English-speakers from the Cameroon and the marginalized Southwestern Nigerians interviewed for this research. The role of socio-cultural factor in influencing West African immigration to South Africa is fostered by a tradition to migrate, which as a result of forced migration, had become customary amongst the younger population in the West African sub-region.

Apart from these factors discussed above, I equally observed in my research that family-pride also played an important role in West African immigration to South Africa. In Cameroon like in most West African countries, families with relatives abroad are highly respected and admired. An illustration of the significance of family pride as a push factor of migration in the West African sub-region is presented in three case studies in Chapter Four of this thesis. To sum up this section of the chapter, I found out, it is the combination of the factors discussed above, and not any single factor that influence West African immigration to South Africa.

On arrival in South Africa, immigrants are supposed to report to the nearest DHA office for processing of their documentation. The Braamfontein DHA was selected as the case study for the following reasons. It is the only refugee reception office in Johannesburg, and the closest DHA office to Hillbrow the study area for this research. Although in terms of its own definition of its mission, the DHA is supposed to give these immigrants the best of treatment, my research found that this was far from being the case. My research findings showed that, before 1998, all non-South Africans in the country were considered as aliens and prohibited persons under the Aliens Control Act (ACA) of 1991. Even though this Act was amended in 1998, state attitude towards immigrants persisted and effectively affects popular attitude towards immigrants in the country.

Before 1998, immigrants were issued with a Temporary Permit to Prohibited Persons (TPPP) under Section 41 of the ACA of 1991. After 1998, immigrants were issued with an Asylum Seekers Temporary Permit (ASTP) under Section 22 of the new Refugee Act of December 1998. But, I found in this research that these documents (be it the TPPP or the ASTP) did not help immigrants live a better life in South Africa. Instead, the

document acted as a pretext for, and reinforced discrimination and xenophobic hostility towards these immigrants in the country. This kind of attitude towards immigrants has been observed elsewhere (Malkki, 1992). Even though the old Act allowed asylum seekers to study or take-up employment in the country, the new Act entertains such privileges only after the decision to grant refugee status has been reached. Whatever the situation, these privileges are not easy to come by, thus, most immigrants end up staying and surviving for the rest of their stay in the country as unemployed asylum seekers.

I also observed that, to acquire or to renew the Asylum Seekers Permit were major problems for many Cameroonian and Nigerian immigrants in the country. The process is stressful, expensive and DHA officials treat this category of immigrants with hostility and discrimination. Immigrants are attacked, robbed, and arrested by police officials on their way to renew their documentation in the DHA office. Because of the over-crowded nature of the DHA offices, immigrants are forced to bribe their way through to the officials. I found that bribery and corruption in the DHA office is a common practice, and interpreters, who are supposed to help immigrants visiting this office, act more like a medium through which bribes are channeled to the officials. In the DHA office, I observed that the behaviour of DHA officials often reflects particular prejudice towards Cameroonians and Nigerians. The case of Isaac Nguetchue and Nicholas Tchiegue Versus the Department of Home Affairs discussed in Chapter Four is suggestive. Immigrants visiting this office are not given proper assistance to ease the processing of their documentation. Although in theory interpreters are appointed to help interpret and facilitate the acquisition of documents, in reality, interpreters play the role of intermediaries between immigrants and officials, taking bribes in order to facilitate the processing of documents. Despite bribing the officials through interpreters, it may still take hours before an immigrant is allocated to an SDO, and/or call in for a brief interview. Getting access into the office is also no guarantee that one will be called for an interview. I observed that Cameroonians and Nigerians often spent whole days waiting in the office, only for an official to tell them at the end of the day, that the computers are either not working, or their files could not be traced. I also observed in my research that, applications for asylum from Cameroonians and Nigerians were rejected in particular

periods of the year. Reasons being that, it will create peak periods thus necessitating the need for immigrants to bribe the official for their documents to be processed.

Most Cameroonians and Nigerians, who visit this office, often have their application for asylum rejected. They are served with a rejection letter, which always has the same format, content and reasoning. This gives the impression that cases in this office are not considered on an individual bases. The rejection letter appears to be a pre-prepared document for all West Africans entering the country, as each one of them gets this letter at some stage in the asylum seeking process. Finally, I observed that, instead of the theoretically fair and rational kind of bureaucracy celebrated by Max Weber, the procedure of becoming an asylum seeker in the Braamfontein office is a chaotic and inefficient kind of bureaucracy. Common features of bureaucracy such as division of labour, rules and regulations and professionalism were missing in this office leading to what Weber (1997: 976) described as: *“arbitrariness and lordly discretion”*.

Immigrants' experiences with the DHA are not different from those they get with the general public. I observed in this research that West African immigrants particularly Cameroonians and Nigerians are discriminated against by the general public, suffer from xenophobic hostility, and are socially excluded from their host society. In this research, I termed the fear, hatred and the negative reactions towards West African immigrants in the country as 'West-A-Phobia'. Many reasons account for the high levels of xenophobia in South Africa. First, state action in promoting unity and shared identity has reinforced the boundary between South Africans and non-South Africans. Doty (1999) argued that such action could lead to violent assertions of differences between the insiders and the outsiders. In addition, State action to divert public attention to immigrants who serve as handy scapegoats for the social-economic ills in the country is also a major cause for the high levels of xenophobia towards West Africans in South Africa. Such actions are evident in the exaggerated numbers of immigrants in the country given by state officials and institutions. In this way, it generates individual and collective group insecurity amongst South Africans, leading to xenophobic hostility and discrimination. I also observed the unwillingness on the part of South Africans to integrate West Africans,

particularly Cameroonians and Nigerians, into the mainstream society. This lack of social interaction and socialization between South Africans and West African immigrants reduces the ability of both sides to develop independent opinions about one another. The high levels of xenophobia can also be attributed to the large influxes of immigrants entering the country on a much bigger scale than before. At the same time, beliefs by some South Africans that immigration is a socio-economic burden on the country, and immigrants commit crime, are threats to the scarce jobs, and carriers of diseases are forced to generate hostile reactions towards these immigrants in the country.

The high levels of xenophobia in South Africa are largely reinforced by the role of the media in promoting xenophobia in the country. Some researchers have observed similarly, noting that the media plays a crucial role in the rising tides of xenophobia towards African immigrants in the country (Danso and McDonald, 2001; McDonald, 2002). My research findings are not different from theirs. Media reporting always associated immigrants with particular crimes. West Africans for example are often associated with crime, drugs, diseases, and other social ills in the country. I observed during this research that news coverage of immigration issues are often exaggerated or presented in a manner that could excite xenophobic feelings.

This research finding showed that, Cameroonians and Nigerians experience xenophobic hostility largely from black South Africans, giving the impression that xenophobia in South Africa has replaced internal racism of the apartheid years. It appears to be a new kind of racism in South Africa, which reflects racism without race. My research findings showed that, acts discriminating against, isolating and expelling West African immigrants are very much related to their socio-cultural differences with South Africans. Outside any biological differences, West African immigrants of today's democratic South Africa have replaced biological difference, which imposes the superiority of one race over the other in the apartheid years.

The effects of 'West-A-Phobia' on West African immigrants in South Africa are many. First, 'West-A-Phobia' has influenced the types of economic activities of some

immigrants in the country. Second, because ‘West-A-Phobia’, marginalized these immigrants, some of them have engaged in activities outside the margins of the law to ensure their survival in the country. Thirdly, to escape the negative consequences of ‘West-A-Phobia’, some immigrants have adapted to the situation, which in effect has changed their national and personal identities. These kinds of experiences and reactions are common experiences of most Diasporic populations (Clifford, 1994; MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga, 2000). Even though South Africans blame West Africans for the high unemployment rates in the country, my research findings showed that only 6% of the immigrants who were interviewed are formally employed. This has resulted to most immigrants preferring their home countries than South Africa. Up to 48% of the immigrants interviewed for this research blamed ‘West-A-Phobia’ as the main reasons why they would like to move out of South Africa to elsewhere.

How West African immigrants adapt to xenophobic hostility in South Africa was one central focus of this research. I found that, because of ‘West-A-Phobia’, some immigrants adapt their hair and dressing styles to resemble those of South Africans. Others are learning some local South African languages and dancing styles, some making more South African friends, changing their legal status, and joining social clubs and organizing social get-together. These were some common strategies that I observed with some West African immigrants in their attempt to secure assimilation, fight for, and resist xenophobic hostility in South Africa. Elsewhere, such strategies for assimilation and adapting new identity have been termed hybrid identity (Crush and McDonald, 2002; McDonald, 2002). Similar strategies have been observed elsewhere amongst immigrant population (Malkki, 1992; Crush and McDonald, 2002; McDonald, 2002; Malkki, 1992).

I observed that immigrant social organizations played major roles in establishing immigrants’ networks. Through these networks, they can secure employment, facilitate skills transfer and training, and develop immigrant ethnic niches. The many West African niches in Hillbrow are as a result of their strong and complex web of West African networks in the neighbourhood. I found that these organizations main objectives are to

look after the well-being of their members, enforce solidarity amongst members, and maintain strong backward ties with their countries of origin.

Apart from the effects of 'West-A-Phobia', I also found out in this research that West African immigrants in South Africa suffer from social exclusion. My research findings showed that West African immigrants in South Africa are being shut out fully or partially from both the socio-economic, political and the cultural systems in their host society. They lack, and have been refused certain socio-economic, cultural and political rights in the country. They suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, low income, poor housing, and living conditions, live in high crime environments, lack medical facilities, and are members of minority groups. These characteristics have been identified elsewhere with other immigrant population (Byrne, 1999; Porter, 2000; Walker and Walker, 1997).

Even though Cameroonian and Nigerian immigrants in South Africa suffer from discrimination, exclusion and xenophobic hostility, they continue to fight for their socio-economic survival in the country in many ways. Through engaging in small business activities and others outside the margins of the law, some of these immigrants are able to achieve economic successes. The following were found to be the reasons behind immigrants' economic successes, despite being marginalized in their host society. First, they can easily raise initial capital through their community connections, organizations, close relatives, and from fellow immigrants. These sources of income for immigrant communities are not uncommon elsewhere (Gold, 1992; MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga, 2000). Second, the solidarity and trust amongst these immigrants facilitate the flow of resources amongst kin, friends, compatriots and clients. This economic advantage is strengthened by the fact that they are largely concentrated in a particularly neighbourhood (Hillbrow). The low cost of living, the presence of relatives and friends, as well as the commercial potential of Hillbrow were the main reasons why these immigrants concentrated in the neighbourhood. Gold (1992) observed similar advantages for Vietnamese businesses in Orange County in the United States. Third, immigrant businesses also enjoy the socio-economic and cultural advantages of using family labour.

In this way, immigrant business owners can minimize labour cost, while at the same time; the family labour provides loyal services.

Amongst the immigrants' small business activities observed for this research, restaurants, bars, fruits and vegetable shops, beauty shops, hair dressing and beauty salons were the most common. I observed that these West African small businesses are well established all over Hillbrow. In the immigrant restaurants and bars for example, most of the employees are fellow immigrants, newly arrived immigrants and relatives of the business owners. They sell ethnic foods and goods, and play mostly ethnic music in these bars. In this way, immigrants exhibited strong attachments to their national identity, while at the same time they absorb new identities to cope with the prevailing situation in the country. Research conducted in the United States observed similar trends, and established that immigrant entrepreneurs are major employers of immigrants and suppliers of ethnic goods in their community (Foner, 1987a, Stafford, 1987; Wong, 1987). I observed that immigrants' business establishments are equally meeting places for compatriots, and sources of information about their homes and host country.

This research also established that some West African immigrants are coming more as transmigrants than asylum seekers. The immigrants live their lives both in South Africa and in their home countries. They, for example, buy electronics and other goods in South Africa for sale in their home countries, and buy ethnic goods from their home countries for sale in South Africa. In this way, they survive the economic hardship and marginalisation in South Africa, and at the same time, they are able to send remittances to their home countries, and establish or expand on their businesses in South Africa. My research found that, the daily lives of West African immigrants in Johannesburg depend on multiple and constant interconnections across international borders, and that their identities are configured in relationship to South Africa and that of West Africa.

Finally, I observed that some immigrants survive in the country by engaging in activities outside the margins of the law. Because immigrants dreams of improving their socio-economic status in South Africa are being frustrated by discrimination and exclusion,

some immigrants contested boundaries of the law, by engaging in activities outside the margins of the law. MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga (2000) have shown that when immigrants are discriminated against and marginalized, they tend to engage in activities outside the law. My research showed that amongst the contested boundaries, are taxes and custom duties, identifications documents, unlicensed taxi drivers and drivers' licenses, and engaging in illicit financial transaction and money laundering. Elsewhere, other researchers see transgressing boundaries of the law as the everyday resistance practices common amongst the poor and the powerless (MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga, 2000; Scott, 1985; 1987; 1990). My findings showed that, West African immigrants transgress boundaries of the law in South Africa because they are socio-economically, culturally and politically marginalized in the country.

SOME POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

This research will be incomplete, if some policy suggestions based on the research finding are not made. To begin with, it is tempting to suggest that South Africa should implement a quota system, which limits the number of inflow of West African immigrants into the country. But this strategy has its own weaknesses, and has failed in a numbers of countries (see, Heisbourg, 1991; Bearman, 1991). The following argument can be advanced as to why the quota strategy will certainly fail in South Africa. First, such a strategy will only limit the number of inflow of legal migrants, and will have little effect on illegal migrants and asylum seekers entering the country. In addition, this research focused was on West African immigrants in the country, most of whom have entered the country as asylum seekers and/or illegal immigrants. Hence, the quota system will play a very little or no role in reducing the West African population who are already in South Africa. Second, the quota system will mean greater control on the borders, which will imply additional cost for the South African government, mindful of the already high cost of repatriation of illegal immigrants and other foreign nationals by the state. Finally, Bearman (1991) observed that, African borders are increasingly porous thus rendering any such efforts of border control useless. Perhaps informing prospective migrants in the West African sub-region, by way of newspapers, radio, and television in their respective countries, of the obstacles they might face in South Africa, and some of

the experiences of West African immigrants in South Africa, might help reduce the number of inflow into South Africa. If migrants are well informed about where they are going, and what they should be expecting on arrival, some prospective migrants will obviously reconsider their choice of destination. It might work even better if education on immigration and the state of affairs in the country of intended migration is made compulsory to all potential migrants, and as a condition for getting a visa to the intended country of immigration. This process might help reduce the ignorance of prospective migrants' choice of destination.

From an overall perspective, it appears the 'carrot approach'; a strategy which aims at providing incentives for prospective immigrants to stay within the borders of their own country (Hussein, 1993) is the best recommendation for this study. The success of such strategy can only be achieved, if the socio-economic, cultural and political causes, which give rise to migration are properly redress. Socio-cultural, economic and political pluralism in the West African sub-region would make a great difference to people's perceptions of their future in their own countries. So would better governmental practices and more effective strategies of economic development. Any improvement in political and socio-economic conditions in West Africa would certainly reduce the number of asylum seekers and refugees from the West African sub-region entering South Africa.

South Africans also need to come to understand that migration is a normal phenomenon, and immigrants need not be viewed as a threat to the country's socio-economic, cultural and political resources. West African immigrants have their own contributions to make in South Africa. They are active economic agents, and add to the cultural diversity and heritage of the country. Through socialization, and a willingness to integrate these immigrants into the wider South African society, the country in particular, and the continent as a whole can gainfully benefit from cultural pluralism, and socio-economic development.

The administrative mechanism of the Braamfontein DHA can be improved if fraud, corruption, discrimination, and the 'lordly discretions' of SDOs are eliminated. Home

Affairs officials should be properly educated about African and world affairs, and properly trained on how to deal with human beings from other parts of the world. They should also be made to understand that, there are other factors apart from the lack of a democratically elected government, or a Human Rights Commission, that can force people to move out of their countries of origin in search of asylum elsewhere. These factors can include issues under the domain of social, cultural, religious, wars, political, as well as forces of nature like droughts, floods, and earthquakes.

Special Human Rights legal practitioners should be set aside for immigrants in need of legal services, and such information, and how the legal practitioners can be reached should be made known to all categories of immigrants on their arrival in the DHA office irrespective of their country of origin. Interpreters should be well known, trained and qualify before they can be allowed to work in the DHA. They should be able to speak, write and interpret for their clients, and work on a full-time and not on a part-time basis. If measures of this nature are taken into consideration and actually put into practice, it might help reduce the ugly practices of bribery and corruption that have ravaged the Braamfontein Department of Home Affairs. It will also reduce the plight of asylum seekers and refugees visiting this office, as well as increase the confidence of immigrants visiting this office. In addition, selecting interpreters in this office should not be sex selective. Proportional numbers of male as well as female interpreters should represent immigrants in the DHA office. In this way, refugees and asylum seekers will be well represented without any gender bias, thus, help restore some of the lost human dignity of some immigrants visiting this office. The DHA should also show itself more willingly to bring disciplinary actions and criminal charges against corrupt DHA officials and employees.

Keeping asylum seekers out of work and schooling for too long a period (until the decision whether or not to grant refugee status is reached) can lead to catastrophic results. The need to survive for immigrants is very crucial, which if not satisfied, might push the immigrant into a criminal class. Hence, creating favorable conditions for these immigrants to study or work might help reduce the number of West African immigrants

who are engaged in illegal activities in the country. The DHA needs to show that it is evaluating all asylum applications individually and carefully. There is a strong need to increase the number of offices dealing with asylum and refugees affaires, with well trained and qualified interpreters and legal practitioners. It might also help to reduce the heavy congestion of immigrants in the Hillbrow neighbourhood and the DHA office.

The '*you must leave*' document has negative implications for the state and the immigrants. First, it forces the rejected immigrants to operate clandestinely, evade possible taxes, and equally prevents the state from possible revenue from immigrants who would have engaged in small business activities. Second, by refusing asylum to some categories of immigrants, the state denies herself possible foreign social capital entering the country as immigrants, and only helps to increase the number of illegal immigrants in the country. In addition, it is in contravention to international agreements like the 1951 convention, the 1967 protocol and the 1969 OAU convention governing refugees and their status (UN Convention, 1951; OAU Convention, 1969), all of which South Africa is an authentic and acceded member.

Immigration policy in South Africa should have a less exclusionist character and be based on facilitation and management rather than control and deportation. Social interactions between South Africans and West Africans should be encouraged. In this way, there will be a better understanding between the two groups. This might help reduce the high levels of xenophobia and discrimination in the country towards West African immigrants. South African affirmative action should be a temporal rather than a permanent measure, and should be targeting a particular problem, not with the intention of discriminating on particular groups (Crosby and Clayton, 1990; Sowell, 1980). If immigrants were given more and better opportunity to live and work freely in the country, most of the immigrants involved in activities outside the margins of the law would not have been involved. But failing such changes, the West African immigrants of Hillbrow will struggle on as best as they can.