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The complicated lives of Nigerian immigrants in South Africa

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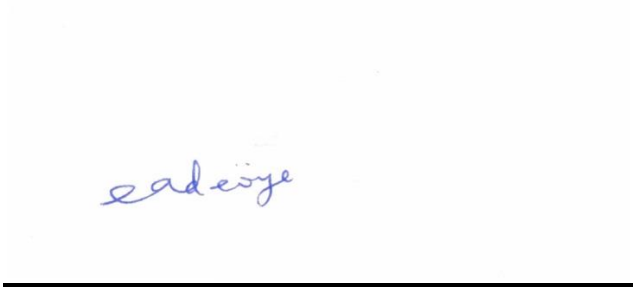
Abstract

This thesis investigates the motivation of Nigerian migration to South Africa. The thesis explores the diverse experiences of Nigerian immigrants and what role class plays. And it explains why some refuse to return to Nigeria despite the obstacles they face. It investigates the causes of xenophobia and explains the stereotypes that have earned Nigerians an unfair reputation. South Africa's first democratic elections in 1994 was a moment of optimism. Nigeria was experiencing economic and political turmoil at the time. The lure of economic opportunities has led some 30,000 Nigerians to South Africa. Some are middle class or higher, working as doctors and academics. Some are undocumented migrants navigating a complex situation, sometimes on the receiving end of xenophobic violence. Shops have been looted or razed; some have died. This thesis is divided into two parts: a longform article titled "The complicated lives of Nigerian immigrants in South Africa" based on information garnered through interviews with subjects some of whom are identified with pseudonyms, academic research and media reports. The article contains some elements of my own experience as a Nigerian student in South Africa. The second part is the academic method document that underpins the project.

Declaration

I declare that this research report is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Master of Arts by Coursework and Research Report in Journalism, at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination at any other university.



Adeoye Emmanuel Aanu

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SECTION I

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

The complicated lives of Nigerian immigrants in South Africa.

INTRODUCTION

Growing up as a child in Nigeria in the late 1990s and early 2000s, I remember older Nigerians talking fondly of South Africa. It was the land of Nelson Mandela, the man who spent 27 years in prison fighting against an unjust system and then stepped aside after only one term in office. In a country that carried the scars of military regimes and coups and was still navigating its way around a nascent democracy, Mandela's South Africa was the symbol of hope and endless possibilities.

South Africa has since emerged as a destination for Nigerians seeking greener pastures abroad. According to South Africa's 2001 Census, there were 7,172 Nigerians living in the country, with the majority (5,029) living in Gauteng Province (Segatti et al, 2012). Nigerian migration to South Africa has grown steadily over time, with an estimated 3,000 to 4,000 per month entering into the country between 2008 and 2010 (Segatti et al, 2012). The Nigerians who enter South Africa are overwhelmingly male, high to medium-skilled employees like doctors, engineers and academics, students or small entrepreneurs. These entrepreneurs run bars, restaurants and barbershops. Nigerian Pentecostal churches have also grown in popularity in South Africa.

Nigerians are prolific travellers in search of opportunities for a better standard of living. There has been a concerted emigration out of the country since at least the 1970s due to a shrinking democratic space and lack of economic prospects. Highly educated Nigerians make the decision to travel elsewhere that has contributed to the so-called "brain drain." Currently, 45% of Nigerian adults say they plan to leave the country in the next five years (Connor & Gonzalez-Barrera, 2019).

But migrating to South Africa has been fraught with challenges for Nigerians. For those seeking asylum, 99.9% of them are denied the right to stay — the average rate of denial for other nationalities is 86% (Segatti et al, 2012). For those who are not asylum seekers, the threat of xenophobic violence is all too real. The dangers are further exacerbated for those who belong to the lowest economic classes living in areas of high economic deprivation characterized by informal housing, a high number of male residents and language diversity, including South

African languages (Landau & Monama, 2016). There is a class divide in how migrants are likely to experience threats. For those working in academia or in the medical fields and living in the suburbs, talk of violence is far removed from their daily lives. As a graduate student safely tucked away in Parktown, I am acutely aware of this postcode privilege.

Xenophobia is a "perennial feature" of post-apartheid South Africa, according to the African Centre for Migration and Society. Tens of thousands of foreigners have been physically or verbally harassed, attacked, had their shops looted or even been murdered since 1994 (Monson & Misago, 2009). The centre, based at the University of the Witwatersrand, defines xenophobic violence as an attack on foreigners because they're outsiders in a given country. There have been pockets of violence since the end of apartheid and the attacks peaked in 2008 and 2015. More than 60 people, including 21 South Africans, were killed in the 2008 violence that began in Alexandra township, Johannesburg, before spreading to seven of South Africa's nine provinces, according to Human Rights Watch's 2008 report on South Africa.

The reasons for these attacks are varied. Some of the perpetrators of the attacks have stated that immigrants take jobs away from South Africans, undercut wages because they cannot negotiate due to their illegal status in the country and commit crimes. As a South African interviewed in the *New York Times* claimed: *"*A South African may take your cellphone, but he won't kill you. A foreigner will take your phone *and* kill you." (Bearek & Dugger, 2008).

Nigerians have a caricatured reputation as being involved in crime syndicates that traffic hard drugs and produce counterfeit medicines. Like every stereotype, there is some kernel of truth behind it. A 1996 newspaper report showed local officials across southern Africa and U.S. government leaders involved in anti-drug smuggling efforts were concerned about Nigerian drug rings operating across the region (Rotberg, 1996).

But the overwhelming majority of Nigerians in South Africa are law-abiding.

Nigerian men are also accused, by South African men, of "taking our women." (McKenzie, 2016). While some of the comments about this "taking of women" phenomenon is facetious, there is some data showing the growing rate of marriages between middle/upper middle class Nigerian men and South African women (Adeagbo, 2011).

Studies have also shown other reasons for xenophobic violence. These include local community leaders strengthening their power bases by calling on residents to attack outsiders. Business

owners are also accused of using violence to stifle their foreign-owned competition (Landau & Monama, 2016).

All of the above reasons contribute to xenophobic violence towards African migrants. There is a growing body of evidence that these violent attacks continue due to the South African government's failure to provide protection to foreigners (Monson & Misago, 2009). Despite South Africa's liberal constitution and transition to democracy, "racism is a key feature of South Africa's immigration legislation and practice, both historically and currently," according to a research paper from the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSVR) (Harris, 2001). And in certain cases, "South African citizens have also fallen victim to xenophobia because they are perceived in racist terms as 'too dark to be South African'", the CSVR found. Indeed, two South African sisters were arrested by the police in Johannesburg in August 2019 during raids on illegal immigrants. One of them was told she "looked Ethiopian" and both spent five days in custody (ANA Reporter, 2019).

In 2017, there were xenophobic attacks specifically targeting Nigerians in Rosettenville, a low-income suburb in Johannesburg south. The rioters torched almost a dozen homes and attacked businesses belonging to Nigerians (Whittles, 2017). They said they were protecting their communities from drug dealers and brothels and took matters into their own hands. There is an obvious class angle to these attacks: Nigerians living in highbrow suburbs only hear about them in the media — it might as well have happened in a different country.

Xenophobic violence against foreign nationals flared up again in 2019 and dominated the headlines. More than 10 people were left dead as protests against alleged drug-dealing foreigners devolved into violence and looting of shops (Adeoye, 2019). There was widespread condemnation across the continent, with pop stars cancelling concerts and countries pulling out of soccer matches. Nigeria recalled its ambassador and boycotted a major economic summit (Turkewitz, 2019). The relationship between Nigeria and South Africa, the continent's two biggest economies, sunk to perhaps an all-time low as South Africa closed its diplomatic missions in Nigeria. South African president Cyril Ramaphosa sent an envoy to Abuja, Nigeria's capital, to apologize to Nigeria and promised his counterpart Muhammadu Buhari to prevent further attacks on Nigerians. The relationship was so badly damaged that Nigeria airlifted more than 600 of its citizens out of South Africa. South African businesses in Nigeria including MTN and Shoprite faced retaliatory attacks by looters and arsonists, leading to a temporary shutdown of some of their outlets.

Despite the well-documented threats and instances of violence, Nigerians still work, live and study in South Africa. I am one of them. When I was preparing to move to Johannesburg in January 2020, the most common question I got from friends and family centred around my safety here.

This project sought to uncover the lives of Nigerians in this country. Not a lot is known about Nigerian immigrants beyond the caricatures and stereotypes. This longform project was designed to understand how Nigerians live and interact with the country they now live in and understand their varied experiences. The subjects were lawyers, doctors, shop owners, students, young and old people, people who have been affected by xenophobic violence and those who have enjoyed relative bliss. The project asked why they migrated to South Africa and why they choose to remain. The project found that for most people, their continued stay here is an admission on their part that the economic conditions in South Africa are better than back home despite some of the risks that come with it.

AIM

The long form nonfiction essay aims to tell the stories of Nigerian immigrants in South Africa. The subjects include those who have experienced some form of xenophobic violence or stereotyping regarding them or their children. This will be done as a narrative piece where the author seeks out the stories of the affected using the third-person narrative style, while sometimes allowing for personal experiences to be included as and when relevant.

Scholarly material on the motivations of the Nigerian migrant to South Africa is scant. While there is a lot of research on the effects and aftermath of xenophobic violence, not much is known about why Nigerians still choose to migrate to a country where a small but vocal and sometimes violent section of the society makes them feel unwelcome. Findings reveal that the South African media have been complicit in the framing of Nigerians as criminals and a threat to their citizens, despite the lack of evidence to back such claims (Segatti et al, 2012).
This project aims to tell the complex stories of those involved from all angles, treating the subjects as fully-fledged individuals and not as caricatures as they're often portrayed as. The project will detail the lived experiences of the Nigerian subjects in South Africa, how they view the citizens, food, and culture of their adopted home, and the seemingly mundane activities that they undertake every day.

RATIONALE

Migration has become a hot-button issue over the last few years around the world. Wars in parts of the Middle East have created a surge in people seeking refuge in Europe and other parts of the world. Africa is not left behind. Ongoing crises in different parts of the continent means the relative stability of South Africa is appealing to many asylum seekers. But there are also economic migrants coming into the country; South Africa's status as Africa's most developed economy sees to that. Nigerians, who are prolific travellers, migrate here for a variety of reasons, including working in academic institutions or blue-collar industries like hairdressing. But not much is known about the Nigerian community in South Africa. A 2012 research paper on Nigerians living in South Africa by the African Centre for Migration and Society has provided some of the limited knowledge of what we know. So has the master's thesis (Adeagbo, 2011) on the growing trend of marriages between Nigerian men and South African women in the Johannesburg area. Statistics South Africa's 2016 Community Survey also provides insight into the number of Nigerians living in this country.

Due to cultural and linguistic similarities, a wealth of information is readily available about southern African immigrants from Zimbabwe, Malawi and elsewhere.

The rationale behind this project is to tell the stories about the Nigerian community in South Africa, particularly those in the Johannesburg area. There abounds stereotypes and caricatures of Nigerians as drug dealers, scammers and human traffickers (Jones & Nkosi, 2019) but little is available in the public domain rooted in facts and stories of these people themselves. The rationale of this project is to flesh out who Nigerian immigrants are through interviews with the author. It is to hear of how they have adapted to a new culture different from back home, to understand the circumstances that brought them here. Nigerians often migrate to western nations most especially the United States and the United Kingdom. This project wants to understand why the Nigerians have chosen this country. Is the majority black population in South Africa a consideration for Nigerians? How have the South African families reacted to their daughters marrying Nigerian men? Do the women get any pushback for marrying foreign men? And are children, with parents from two countries, treated differently in the community? These are some of the questions underpinning the rationale for this longform project. It's important to answer these questions to gain a fuller understanding of the nuances of the situations the subjects find themselves in.

The longform project will add new information to the public domain. There is public interest

in exploring Nigerian migrant communities as fully formed characters living and experiencing South Africa and all the positives and negatives that comes with that. If a community is not well-known, stereotypes about them become accepted wisdom. This project will help to combat misinformation that is a by-product of the stereotyping of Nigerians. This project will therefore be significant in adding to publicly available knowledge about Nigerians.

The project spoke to Nigerians living in South Africa across various class divides and sought to get the South African perspective of the relationship with Nigeria.

Finally, another rationale for this longform project is to put into context some of the violence towards foreigners in South Africa. Although only a small section of the overall population advocates for violence towards immigrants, South Africa has a shocking intolerance for foreigners, according to research by the South African Migration Project's Xenophobia Survey. Read (2016) wrote that according to the survey, South Africa exhibits levels of hostility to foreigners that is "virtually unlike anything seen in other parts of the world." Generally, South Africans are in favour tighter immigration restrictions despite about 60% admitting they have had no contact with foreigners.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Causes of migration

Migration is defined as the change of a place of abode that involves the crossing of the boundary of a "migration-defining area" (Kok, 1997). Short-term border crossings without the intention to stay for long do not necessarily contribute to migration. Migration typically refers to taking up residence for a minimum period of at least six months or a year (Castles, 2000).

The reasons for migration are varied and numerous, including for work, as expatriates transferred by their employers, study or fleeing from unsafe conditions such as war (Hughes et al, 2019).

Defining migration has often been a controversial endeavour with legal implications. People moving from one country to another are largely differentiated into two groups: people who choose to leave their own countries are generally tagged as "migrants" and people who have to leave as a result of war, persecution or other forms of discriminations are labelled "refugees" (Carling, 2015). By international law, people classified as refugees cannot be deported under

the 1951 Refugee Convention; migrants have no such protections (Edwards, 2015). They can and are routinely deported back to their countries of origin if they do not migrate legally as defined by individual states.

Most of the Nigerian migrants in South Africa are not fleeing war or oppression, instead, they are in search of a better life for themselves and their families. They are economic migrants. And they have to because Nigerians are "systematically denied" asylum in South Africa while refugees from Somalia, Ethiopia and the Democratic Republic of Congo are regularly waived through (Segatti et al, 2012).

The migration of Africans is often portrayed in the media, by politicians and some scholars as being driven solely by poverty and violence and Eurocentric in its nature, but these ideas are based on assumptions, selective observation rather than any empirical evidence (Flahaux and De Haas, 2016). Indeed, studies show that most migrations from Africans are towards other countries within the continent (Schoumaker et al., 2015; Sander and Maimbo, 2003), Gulf states and the Americas (Bakewell and De Haas, 2007).

And while research has shown that migration from the Great Lakes region and some other parts of Africa are forced and caused by conflict (Bakewell and Bonfiglio, 2013), there is nothing inherently "exceptional" about most African migration (Flahaux and De Haas, 2016). Rather, Africans are just like every other group of migrants in search of education, a better life or spouses (Bakewell and Bonfiglio, 2003, p. 4). While there is limited scholarly research specifically examining the motivations of Nigerian migrants in South Africa, it can be inferred that they migrate for the same reasons as many others in the studies cited above.

A rather thorny issue is the number of Nigerians living in South Africa. While the exact number is unclear, the widely circulated estimate of 800,000 is untrue. "There is absolutely no way that this claim is true," Loren Landau, a research professor at the African Centre for Migration and Society, told the fact-checking news organisation, Africa Check, in 2017.

Landau argued that: "If you look at Statistics South Africa data, there are only about 1.5 to 2 million international migrants in total in the country. Although these figures are undoubtedly imperfect, they are better than any other data out there" (Bhardwaj, 2017).

Therefore, a more reliable number of Nigerian migrants in South Africa stands at 30,314 people

or about 2.1% of foreign-born people living in South Africa, according to Statistics South Africa's 2016 Community Survey. There are more British people living in South Africa than Nigerians, according to the survey.

Iyonawan Masade's work on Nigerians living in Cape Town proves instructive in teasing out the varying motivations of Nigerian migrants. Featured in *Imagining the City: Memories and Cultures in Cape Town* (2007), Masade interviews 41 Nigerians to get a sense of their motivations for migrating to South Africa. Generally, these subjects had the same reasons for migrating as the Nigerians living in North America or Europe: a failure of leadership that has led to the collapse of infrastructure and service delivery and poverty. To those people, it was clear that the promises of independence had not been fulfilled. By 2000, Nigeria's per capita income had fallen below what was obtainable at independence in 1960. With the realisation that Nigeria was not a viable place to live, many immigrants "chose to settle in South Africa because it provided the balance between remaining in Africa while still enjoying a similar standard of living as that of wealthy western nations," according to Masade.

Nigerian migration to South Africa is a relatively new concept. There are two reasons for that. Although most Nigerians living in South Africa have migrated by choice and not as a result of displacement caused by war, many of them did not have South Africa in mind as their first-choice destination. As Masade (2007, p. 100) uncovers, many Nigerians in South Africa have either lived elsewhere for a significant period or chose to move here after their attempts to move to Europe failed. And secondly, there was almost no legitimate means of migrating into South Africa during apartheid. When South Africa became a Union in 1910, it began a system of racially exclusionary migration policies that allowed only white people while black people, primarily from southern Africa, were allowed to temporarily work on commercial farms and mines (Peberdy, 2009).

Discrimination towards immigrants

Immigrants around the world face significant levels of discriminatory attitudes from native populations. According to Nicholas Sambanis, a political scientist at the University of Pennsylvania, this is often due to "economic reasons because of competition for jobs or due to the perceived cultural threat that immigrants pose to their host country by challenging dominant norms and changing the national identity." Discrimination against migrant populations is now established as a "cultural" phenomenon (Hainmueller and Hopkins, 2014, p. 231).

It is therefore not a surprise that Nigerian immigrants sometimes face hostility from their host nation, it is simply a manifestation of a global problem.

Some of the Nigerians in South Africa migrated because of how acute the class divide back home is but there is also no escaping how much class shapes their experiences in their new home (Masade, 2007). Educated and highly skilled immigrants work as academics, doctors or nurses. And unskilled immigrants must make do in the informal sector and are much more likely to be unemployed or in precarious employment (Akokpari 2001, p. 12). But regardless of socioeconomic status, "Nigerians in South Africa are generally stigmatised by the press and society at large, being labelled as criminals or perceived as threats by local South Africans seeking employment" (Akokpari 2001, p. 12; Danso & McDonald 2000).

Peberdy (2009, p. 4) notes that language used by government officials "constantly evokes notions of a nation as a body that could be fortified or contaminated by immigrants." And as such there is a level of state-sanctioned discrimination carried out by the South African Police Service or Home Affairs. Peberdy (2009, p. 3) points out that the "immigration policy of the post-apartheid South African state and the language used to justify it at times seem to contradict its stated and apparent commitment to democracy, inclusivity and human rights, and raises questions about continuity and change with the past."

The media also plays a role in promoting stereotypes about Nigerian immigrants in South Africa. While there are indeed Nigerians involved with crime syndicates and counterfeit goods and drug trafficking, they are a "demographically marginal" group compared to many law-abiding immigrants (Segatti et al, 2012). Therefore, the media's fixation on the few involved in criminal activities conveniently ignores "the richness and diversity of Nigerians" in this country and betrays the "poor reporting" on show by the press (Segatti et al, 2012).

Yet, despite the overt and covert discrimination they may face, it is not enough for Nigerian immigrants to quit South Africa. Instead, achieving some form of material success is the only true determinant of when they return home (Masade 2007, p. 104) otherwise they will be stigmatised as failures upon their return.

This literature review is sourced from historical and contemporary printed publications

including newspapers and magazines, historical documents, books about migration, academic journals, and commissioned reports.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

It is critical to understand the historical context of the relationship between Nigeria and South Africa both during apartheid and after in order to have a full view of the relationship between both countries. Scholars like Nagar and Peterson (2012) have documented this relationship and point out that one of the major reasons for the deterioration of ties between both nations, beyond their jostling for influence as Africa's two most important nations, is the perceived lack of gratitude from South Africa. As Nagar and Peterson write:

> "After democratic rule was established in South Africa in 1994, it was anticipated that the new South African government would be conscious of a debt of gratitude to Nigeria, and that this would lay the foundation for the development of a close relationship between the two countries. However, the burden of such a debt can, by definition, exceed the capacity of the indebted – in this case, South Africa – to repay it. "

Indeed, this sense of a lack of gratitude sometimes permeates the discourse in Nigeria when xenophobic attacks occur in South Africa. The idea being that not only is violence wrong but it is doubly wrong when it is committed against citizens of countries who stood by South Africa during the brutality of the apartheid regime. A number of prominent anti-apartheid activists, including future president Thabo Mbeki, spent time living in Nigeria. The South African Relief Fund (SARF) which saw civil servants contribute 2% of their salaries to the fight against apartheid was also set up. It was popularly known as the "Mandela Tax." (Abegunrin, 2009).

A Nigerian analyst quoted by the AFP news agency in 2017 said that xenophobic attacks were acts of "criminal ingratitude" by South Africa: "Apartheid is one dark era in the history of South Africa that the country should be eternally grateful to Nigeria for her role in bringing the era to an end at the time it did."

Nigeria's admirable foreign policy as champions of African independence shortly after its own independence from Britain is a study in contrasts. While fighting for freedom abroad through military and financial means, and boycotts of sporting events, Nigeria's military regimes were increasingly clamping down on dissenters at home, including the killing of the environmental activist Saro-Wiwa and eight of his associates that led to a public rift between Nigeria and

South Africa in the mid-1990s. This seeming lack of awareness is described by Nagar and Paterson (2012) as Nigeria "overlooking the point that such a leadership role [on the continent] needs to be continuously earned."

Since the departure of Olusegun Obasanjo as president in 2007, Nigeria has been conspicuous by its absence in a leadership role on the continent. Egbejule (2020) notes that when the president of the small island nation of São Tomé and Príncipe was deposed by coup plotters while on a trip to Abuja in 2003, Obasanjo personally intervened by mediating and accompanying the ousted president Fradique de Menezes back to his country. Interestingly, the coup was led by Buffalo Battalion, pro-apartheid fighters from South Africa and the country sent Kingsley Mamabolo, the then deputy director of the Africa department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to lead the South African mediating efforts (The New Humanitarian, 2003). This was another instance of both countries working in tandem for the common good.

Egbejule (2020) lists instances where Nigeria the so-called "giant of Africa" is being sidestepped on the international front including the visa ban on its citizens by the Donald Trump administration of the United States and Kenya being selected by the U.S. as the country it will establish new trade links with. Current president Buhari's influence is described as "weak" and Nigeria's foreign policy "nonexistent." According to Egbejule, Buhari's "weak" policies have led to negative outcomes for Nigerians abroad. "Nigerians are being treated shabbily in Ghana, South Africa, Malaysia, Indonesia and elsewhere, but too often the country has not backed its talk with strong action," Egbejule wrote.

METHODOLOGY

This research aims to explore the stories of Nigerian immigrants in South Africa and as such it will tell the stories of various classes of immigrants on different visa categories. The subjects included traders, those who have married their South African partners, academics and students, and those who are here illegally, mostly by overstaying their visas. In total, almost two dozen subjects were interviewed, although I cut out some of their stories from the final narrative because of its similarities to some of those already included.

The interviews were a hybrid of in-person chats and phone calls and Zoom meetings. The initial plan was to spend considerable one-on-one time with the subjects and embed in community events hosted by the Nigerian diaspora in South Africa but the ongoing coronavirus pandemic

of 2020 and threats to public health safety put paid to those plans. The in-person interviews took place in shops in Hillbrow and in a mechanic workshop in Cleveland. The phone conversations were lengthy and involved some subjects in Pretoria to broaden the scope outside of Johannesburg. The youngest subject was a 24-year-old intern doctor and the oldest a 71-year-old cobbler. There was ethnic diversity to reflect the groups of Nigerians, particularly Igbo and Yoruba, present in South Africa. There was also a good mix between men and women.

The interviews were largely conducted in English, Nigeria's only official language that cuts across the many ethnic groups present in the country. I spoke to three subjects in Yoruba, the language of the southwestern people of Nigeria where I'm from.

The interviewees were told the specific purpose of the research project and anonymity was granted to those who requested it for reasons ranging from protecting their identities or their vulnerabilities as they navigate the immigration system. I identified the subjects through a mixture of personal relationships, introductions and through a community leader who recommended some subjects.

I consulted a wide range of academic journals, books and magazines that have written extensively about migration, and the relationship between Nigeria and South Africa from as early as 1960. Many journal materials were sourced from the online publications of the African Centre for Migration and Society (ACMS) at the University of the Witwatersrand and the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA) based at the same institution. Both organisations have produced a wealth of materials that were relevant in this research.

Lastly, news reports in the international and local press were used in this research project. There's a treasure trove of information to be found in local publications like the *Mail & Guardian*, the *Daily Maverick, News24* and others. International outlets like the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *BBC*, to name a few, have chronicled xenophobic attacks and the uncertain fates of immigrants in South Africa.

NARRATIVE MOTIVATION

Intent

I wrote this project as a narrative nonfiction written in the third person, with occasional first-person references to contextualise events as they relate to my own experiences as an immigrant.

My motivation was to tell the stories of the people involved and to capture the complexities and tangents of this story. This story was presented as a journalistic feature that abides by the rules one would find in newspapers, magazines and digital outlets. The stories will be factual and objective and will provide necessary context where required.

Style

The stories of migration and migrants is an undeniably complex subject. This thesis therefore treats the subjects with the care, nuance and thoroughness they deserve. The longform narrative approach was journalistic and fact-based in its nature. There were no attempts to glamourize or sanitize the experiences of the human beings whose stories are being told and the quotes included are as told-to without any editorialising.

The project drew from the style of the journalist Nadja Drost in *The California Sunday Magazine* story titled "When can we really rest?" The story covers the journey of Cameroonian and Pakistani immigrants fleeing tensions in their countries as they travel through the Darién Gap, a dangerous stretch on the Colombia-Panama border, in their bid to claim asylum in the United States. On their way, the group encounter drug-smuggling rings, various national police forces as well as the remains of migrants who died on the same trail they have now embarked on for five days.

Drost's story is similar to the one I want to tell of Nigerian immigrants in South Africa: it features a steely determination to reach or stay in a promised land even in the face of mounting uncertainty.

Fred de Vries's essay "The Great Trek: Afrikaner immigrants in Australia" also employs story-telling techniques that I applied in my own work. De Vries lets his subjects speak for themselves, uncovering the differing reasons for their migration away from home and interjecting to provide necessary commentary and context.

This longform project tells the stories of the subjects in their own words and provides historical context through research and knowledge garnered from journals, news articles and features and speaking to experts. The thesis was written in the third person as much as possible — I was the journalist speaking to and writing about these people's stories. But as a Nigerian living in South Africa, it was inevitable that my own experiences or personal insight would come to bear at

some point. In those cases, I weaved my own knowledge into the longform essay.

I drew on Wolfe and Johnson's *New Journalism* (1973) guide on how to tell a story in a way that captures the attention of readers through journalistic-style reporting and fiction-like attention to detail, creating scenes and capturing dialogue. A particularly fitting example of this technique is Capote's story "In Cold Blood" (1965) that splits the tale of a wealthy family murder into distinct sections while weaving the common theme of the story through each section. I divided the longform project into ten chapters but kept the motivation of the project running in all the sections.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

All the subjects I spoke to had the right of first refusal on anonymity. Every immigrant named expressly consented that their name be used. The others who requested for anonymity or pseudonyms were granted, no questions asked.

As a Nigerian living in South Africa, I was subject to some biases that made me sympathetic to the plight of my subjects. Therefore, my positionality was reflected in the piece and I took clear stances when the situation required it.

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SECTION II

Longform article

Coming to America

John James's journey to South Africa would make an easy fit for a Nollywood movie. Seduced by the allure of America, he emptied his bank accounts and paid ₦1,000,000 ($6,800 in 2010) to a man he'd never met. The plan, the man told James, would be for him to travel to South Africa and spend about three months from where he would then proceed to America. Specifics on how this mysterious fixer would arrange James's passage unto the promised land were never discussed. James, a videographer and DJ at the time, was too excited about the possibilities that lay ahead of him to second-guess his man or ask critical questions of the proposed plan. He was instructed to call the fixer upon landing at O.R. Tambo International Airport in Johannesburg.

James did as he was told; he dialled the fixer's number when he landed. But the line was dead silent. There was no fixer coming to fetch him. He had been duped. America was a distant dream at this point. In the immediate term, he needed to leave the airport and find somewhere to go in Johannesburg, a city where he was visiting for the first time. He had almost no money — he came to South Africa with only $20. Luckily for James, he had informed a cousin already living in South Africa a day before he left Nigeria. He called his cousin who came to pick him up at the airport. This was in 2010.

More than a decade later, James is recounting his first days in South Africa to me on a rainy Tuesday morning at his shop in Hillbrow. James runs a fairly spacious shop called "Spice King" where, as the name suggests, he deals in spices of all kinds. The smell of turmeric, garlic and curry, and ginger waft through the air, giving it the feel of an Indian restaurant. Bags of basmati rice line the shop from wall to wall. Dressed smartly in a coat that has seen better days, James is out of place on a street filled with people in casual clothing. A fast talker with seemingly little patience, James took some convincing before agreeing to speak to me; apparently, a group of student journalists had previously reneged on an agreement they had months earlier when he was interviewed for some project. He'd only speak if I agreed to use a pseudonym for him, he said. When I told him that I was a fellow Nigerian, he seemed to open up more, perhaps sensing some safety in our shared national identities.

A small TV in the corner is hooked up to a speaker loudly blaring a sermon of Pastor T.B. Joshua, a controversial televangelist with sizeable followings in Nigeria and South Africa ("I do not joke with the ministry of Pastor T.B. Joshua," he told me).

James stayed with his cousin for two days before he found his own place, a room in Hillbrow shared with another immigrant. The first month's rent was paid by his generous cousin. He started a joint gizzard braai venture with some other men with equipment bought for R120. They took turns roasting gizzard and living from hand to mouth.

His luck, James says, turned when he met a woman at a church in Balfour Park. Shortly after they began dating, she paid R1,400 for him to rent a room for himself. He had no money to speak of and so he slept on the floor for nine days before saving up for a bed.

"That's when I fell in love with this girl. If this girl can sleep on the floor with me for nine days that means she's a good person. After the ninth day, I bought a bed," he said.

James's girlfriend's benevolence did not end there. At the end of the month, she handed him R10,000 to start a business of his choosing. He sold CDs of Nigerian movies and Christian music; with some secondhand clothes thrown in for good measure. It was a steady if unglamorous source of income. Two years after he moved to South Africa for what was supposed to be a quick stop on the way to a much larger dream, James felt at ease for the first time. By now, he'd given up on his American dreams and was regularly renewing his asylum permit in South Africa. But the peace was short-lived. His girlfriend's sister disapproved of his work, telling him he had "no future", he said. The relationship went downhill from there. And for a while, so did his life. A consignment of CDs from Nigeria never made it to him, essentially ending his business for good.

As is now customary in James's life story, there was soon another girlfriend that helped him get back on his feet. His new girlfriend, an immigrant from Zimbabwe, gave him R6,000 to resuscitate his business just two weeks into the union. James says that infusion of cash helped him grow his business up to the point where he could afford to buy his first car — a Kia Picanto. And his new relationship had a happier ending than the last: James and his girlfriend are now married, with a daughter, Rosemary, born in 2015 added into the mix.

That was the same year he got into the spice business. James had developed a rapport with an elderly woman whom he performed various tasks for — depositing cash in her account today, looking after her shop tomorrow — when she informed him of her desire to sell the shop and retire to Durban. A payment plan was quickly hatched, and James took over the ownership of

the business. By 2017 he had fully paid for the shop where he now stands.

In the decade since he first arrived in South Africa, convinced this country was nothing more than a stopgap on his American Dream, James has worn many hats: gizzard seller, distributor of movies and Christian music and now "Spice King". He has gotten married and fathered a child and opened a beauty therapist parlour for his wife in Fourways, where they now live. If you had offered him this deal when he set out, he would've taken it. It almost certainly would make for a storyline worthy of the Nollywood movies he sold.

"I give god the glory. By the grace of God, I'm not a poor man. At least a car is not a problem to me. This is my story. I'm not poor and I'm not rich but I'm doing okay."

Hunting for hope

Nigerians are prolific globetrotters in search of better economic opportunities. There has been a concerted emigration out of the country since at least the 1970s due to a lack of economic prospects and a shrinking democratic space. Educated and relatively well-off Nigerians as well as the less affluent all scramble for the exit door. Typically, they head to the United States, Canada, Britain or somewhere else in Europe. Among those left behind, the appetite for an out is all too strong: about 45% of Nigerian adults say they plan to leave the country within the next five years. That number is the highest of the 12 countries surveyed across four continents.

Nigerian migration to South Africa is a relatively new phenomenon, primarily because it was almost impossible for black people to migrate to South Africa under apartheid-era immigration laws. When South Africa became a Union in 1910, it began a system of racially exclusionary migration policies that allowed only white people in, while black people, primarily from southern African countries, were allowed to temporarily work on commercial farms and mines (Peberdy, 2009). Diplomatic relations between Nigeria and South Africa were only established in 1995, a year after the first democratic elections that brought Nelson Mandela into power. Before that, Nigeria had informal relations with the African National Congress (ANC).

Churchill, a 71-year-old cobbler, came to South Africa in 1995. He left his life in Nigeria behind because of "bad government and economy". He came to South Africa, he told me, to seek "greener pasture" so he could provide for his five children in Imo state, south-eastern Nigeria.

When Churchill swapped Nigeria for South Africa, both countries seemed to be heading in opposite directions. Nigeria was under the autocratic regime of military ruler General Sani Abacha where dissent was not tolerated, and the economy was skewed in favour of the microscopic elite. People like Churchill were squeezed out. For its part, South Africa was brimming with renewed hope and a sense of immense possibilities. Apartheid had just ended, and Nelson Mandela oversaw a newly born "Rainbow nation".

South Africa was not Churchill's first choice destination. "I wanted to travel to Germany or Italy," he told me during a conversation at his small shop on Pretoria Street in Hillbrow. Churchill, who also doubles as a tailor, saw his plans to move to Europe fall through and settled for South Africa. Settling for South Africa after a move to the West failed to pan out seems to be a common theme among the Nigerians I spoke to. As it was for James who was duped out of his life savings in the hopes of getting to America, so was it for Churchill who made the calculated decision to head to South Africa. And so, it was for some 41 Nigerian migrants interviewed by Iyonawan Masade in *Imagining the City: Memories and Cultures in Cape Town* (Masade, 2007). As the scholar notes, many immigrants "chose to settle in South Africa because it provided the balance between remaining in Africa while still enjoying a similar standard of living as that of wealthy western nations."

In many ways, South Africa is seen by some Nigerian immigrants as a mushy middle: undoubtedly a better deal than the country they come from but still not quite enough to sate their longing for life in the West.

Emeka Onyemaobi, a Nigerian doctor with a private practice in Pretoria, made it to South Africa in 2003 via Australia.

The 51-year-old said: "South Africa was not my initial destination. I went to Australia with a visitor's visa. I wrote the Australian exam to practice as a doctor, but my visa expired and I had to leave the country. Then I came to South Africa from Australia, waiting for the [results of the] exams I wrote in Australia so I could return but unfortunately, I didn't pass. But there was an opportunity to do medical practice here and I took it. That's how I ended up here. South Africa was never in the picture but that was the only place I could come to from Australia when my visa was expiring."

Onyemaobi admits he didn't have a great knowledge of South Africa before arriving here,

describing his entry into the country as “happenstance.” But once he made it here, the lure of basic infrastructure that was and still is sorely lacking in Nigeria was enough to keep him.

“I didn’t know much about South Africa before I came here. When I got here, I saw that the infrastructure was a lot more developed than Nigeria. Those basic things that make life easy, things like good roads, electricity and water.”

Onyemaobi worked in public health for two years and taught at the University of the Witwatersrand for a year before establishing his own practice in Pretoria, specialising in family medicine.

The salary for doctors working in public health was another selling point for him. “When I realised what they were paying them was possibly about 5 to 10 times what I would get in Nigeria, I was motivated by the remuneration, so I stayed back. The salaries of doctors then was a lot more than I could ever dream of in Nigeria,” he said.

Onyemaobi says he is not “deeply attracted” to South Africa and considers himself an “economic refugee” who is living in a country that provides a better life for him than he would have had back home.

“My sojourn to South Africa is economic but I appreciate the fact that life is easier here. You can drive your car on decent roads, and you can open your tap and get decent water.”

But he misses the camaraderie of Nigeria’s vibrant social life here, saying efforts to replicate the social scene don’t necessarily fill the gap.

“From a social viewpoint there isn’t a lot. The life here as a foreigner is not the traditional way we grew up in Nigeria where you have structures like extended family you could visit. There’s always a birthday party or naming ceremony to attend. There are activities that keep you socially engaged. Those things are not here, we try to create them but it’s nothing close to what we have at home. We try to create social outlets like political parties and doctors’ union.

“It’s been a pretty straight life. I do my job as a physician and visit Nigeria once in a while and

live off my income as a physician. I try to get involved in Nigerian activities. It hasn't been anything spectacular. It's just that I realise there are opportunities, and if you come here and have your documentations right, you can actually make your life here. I also realise a lot of people are not as lucky as I am, they don't have skills that are needed in South Africa," he said.

Post-apartheid dreams and nightmares

When apartheid ended in 1994, South Africa became more than just a beacon of hope for its black citizens. Africans across the continent saw the country as a destination beyond their own countries that were often ravaged by war, political strife or economic instability. Its status as the continent's most industrialised economy boosted its profile as a place where dreams could come true for migrants. South Africa's liberalism, including its societal safeguard for sexual minorities in the LGBT community also makes it a destination of choice for those persecuted for their sexual identities at home.

The influx of migrants to South Africa has brought with it a sharp backlash from certain corners of society who associate foreigners with crime, drug-dealing, and hold them responsible for lack of jobs in this country. Researchers at the African Centre for Migration and Society based at the University of the Witwatersrand have described xenophobia as a "perennial feature" of post-apartheid South Africa. This is a position that is at odds with its reputation as a "Rainbow nation", a supposed melting pot of myriad identities. But none of this should come as a surprise: backlash against immigrants now is so established globally that scholars have described it as a "cultural" phenomenon across the world. According to Nicholas Sambanis, a political scientist at the University of Pennsylvania, this is often due to "economic reasons because of competition for jobs or due to the perceived cultural threat that immigrants pose to their host country by challenging dominant norms and changing the national identity." British tabloids are filled with diatribes against immigrants; across Europe, right wing populists have made considerable parliamentary gains, especially in Italy, Germany and the Netherlands, in part because of their strong opposition to refugees and migrants. In the United States, the right-wing news channel Fox News regularly rails against immigrants from South and Central America, people of colour and Muslims in language that can be termed racist or xenophobic. The immediate past president Donald Trump referred to Haiti and African nations as "shithole countries during a conversation with Senators about immigration from those countries, according to multiple reports in the media. Anti-immigrant fervour is alive and well around the world.

But even accounting for the inevitable resistance towards migrants that has taken hold globally, South African attitude towards foreigners is unique in its strong opposition and more historical than the recent vogueishness of anti-immigrant posture that opportunist politicians and right wing media have adopted. A 2006 survey conducted by the South African Migration Project's Xenophobia Survey found that South Africans want the greatest restrictions on immigration and are the least welcoming to foreigners. Jonathan Crush, the founder of the South African Migration Project, wrote that South Africa's intolerance to foreigners is "virtually unlike anything seen in other parts of the world." The numbers are as shocking as they are revealing. 84% of the respondents said South Africa was allowing in "too many" foreigners and 74% support the deportation of migrants who are not contributing economically to the country. But perhaps more worryingly, 60% of these respondents admitted that they had had little to no interactions with foreigners and independently reached their views. The passage of time has not softened South African views on immigrants: a 2015 report by Afrobarometer found that 42% of respondents do not want foreigners to live here at all, believing that they take jobs and benefits away from South Africans.

The seeds of anti-immigrant backlash are often sown in the media. Scholars have found that the South African press has been complicit in the framing of immigrants, particularly Nigerians as criminals and a threat to the physical and economic safety of their citizens, despite a lack of evidence to back their claims. According to one researcher, *The Daily Sun*, a South African tabloid that claims to have over 5 million readers across the country, "regularly and shamelessly portrayed migrants as a prime source of all problems implying that violence would be an understandable and legitimate reaction to them" (Read, 2016). The researcher also found that in 2008, the Media Monitoring Project and the Consortium for Refugees and Migrants in South Africa (CoRMSA) lodged a complaint with the Press Ombudsman over the paper's use of the word "aliens" in reference to foreigners and they were eventually convinced to stop using the term. The media's complicity in stoking xenophobic fears is not old news. Indeed, the Sunday Independent, a widely read Johannesburg-based newspaper, wrote in an August 2020 headline that read: "SA under foreign control." It's worth pointing out that South Africa is not under foreign control. Unlike *The Daily Sun*, *The Sunday Independent* opted out of the Press Council and is therefore not subject to the Press Ombudsman's disciplinary processes.

The media are not the only elements of South African society trading in xenophobic tropes. In 2015, the powerful Zulu king Goodwill Zwelithini told a crowd of about 10,000 in Durban that

foreigners should “please go back to their countries.” He denied culpability for the violent attacks that left at least seven people dead and more than 5,000 displaced from their homes, saying: “If it was true I said people must kill each other, the whole country would be reduced to ashes.” The South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) said that the monarch had “attacked a vulnerable minority” by “making multiple references to foreign nationals as “criminals" which insinuates nefarious motive to their presence in South Africa.” But ultimately, the SAHRC determined it did not “amount to hate speech” (SAHRC, 2016).

Politicians are not left out of this narrative. Former Johannesburg mayor Herman Mashaba authorised a series of police raids between June 2017 and May 2018 on rooms and flats largely occupied by immigrants in the city’s Central Business Districts. The raids were found to be unconstitutional by the high court in Johannesburg. Recently, Mashaba took to Twitter to falsely claim there were 15 million “undocumented foreigners” living in South Africa, before walking back the claim and admitting the figure was “incorrect.” Sally Peberdy, a migration expert, notes that language used by government officials “constantly evokes notions of a nation as a body that could be fortified or contaminated by immigrants.”

When xenophobic attacks occur, there is an almost reflexive refusal to acknowledge it for what it is. Instead, politicians say the attacks are borne out of criminal behaviour by the perpetrators. During a spate of attacks targeting Malawians in 2019, police minister Bheki Cele said reports of attacks on foreigners were blown out of proportion. Cele also said the attacks were in response to crimes committed by foreign nationals. This is an admission of failure by a police minister. When foreigners commit crimes, the police should arrest them as they would any South African engaged in criminal behaviour. Lynch mobs forcing people from their homes is not an acceptable form of response to alleged criminal behaviour. And it is a fallacy to believe that all those who are affected by xenophobic attacks are criminals.

Xenophobic attitudes towards foreigners have unintended consequences on South African citizens. According to a 2001 research paper from the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSVR), “South African citizens have also fallen victim to xenophobia because they are perceived in racist terms as 'too dark to be South African.”. Indeed, two South African sisters were arrested by the police in Johannesburg in August 2019 during raids on illegal immigrants. One of them was told she “looked Ethiopian” and both spent five days in custody before being freed.

Despite South Africa's resistance to foreigners, African migrants are curiously the only targets of anti-immigrant rhetoric or actual violence. There is a fever dream of an invasion led by foreigners and tweets like Mashaba's mischaracterizing the figures of immigrants allude to that. For instance, the number of Nigerians living in South Africa is often inflated to as much as 800,000. Loren Landau, a professor at the African Centre for Migration and Society, told the fact-checking news organisation, Africa Check in 2017 that "there is absolutely no way that this claim is true."

Landau said: "If you look at Statistics South Africa data, there are only about 1.5 to 2 million international migrants in total in the country. Although these figures are undoubtedly imperfect, they are better than any other data out there."

The more reliable number of Nigerian migrants in South Africa probably stands at just a little over 30,000 people or about 2.1% of foreign-born people living in South Africa, according to Statistics South Africa's 2016 Community Survey. According to the survey, there are more British people living in South Africa than Nigerians.

The reasons for the intense focus on African migrants vary but they could be boiled down to economic and racist factors. White immigrants tend to be relatively wealthy and are safely tucked away in the suburbs. African migrants are often poor and living close to or below the poverty line. They compete for scarce resources with poor South Africans, who are statistically more likely to be black. According to the African Centre for Migration and Society, those in most danger of xenophobia belong to the lowest economic classes living in areas of high economic deprivation characterized by informal housing, a high number of male residents and language diversity, including South African languages. These factors provide a fertile ground for potential xenophobic violence. The bifurcation in how immigrants are treated differently also traces back to this country's apartheid past, according to a CSVR research paper. "Racism is a key feature of South Africa's immigration legislation and practice, both historically and currently," the paper said.

There is no disputing that immigrants, just like anyone else, commit crimes in South Africa. Nigerians have been arrested for internet scams, fraud, drug dealing and other crimes in this country. A 1996 newspaper report showed local officials across southern Africa and U.S.

government leaders involved in anti-drug smuggling efforts were concerned about Nigerian drug rings operating across the region (Rotberg, 1996). According to a brief issued in 2012 on Nigerians in South Africa, the incarceration rate for Nigerians is about 2.9% compared to 0.33% for their South African counterparts. However, the researchers concluded, this could indicate a higher level of targeting by the police, which has been anecdotally described (Segatti et al, 2012). Whatever the case may be, there is no sugar coating that Nigerians commit crimes in this country.

Tajudeen Adeyemi, a 41-year-old Nigerian shop owner in Hillbrow, told me recently that Nigerians are not the only foeign nationals dealing drugs in South Africa. Adeyemi claimed Tanzanians, Cameroonians, Ghanaians and others are also involved in the illicit trade. But he says Nigerians are fingered because any English-speaking foreigner in this country is automatically assumed to be Nigerian. Adeyemi, speaking to me in Yoruba language, said he doesn't believe South Africans are xenophobic and faults the Nigerians who are involved in illegal activities.

"Nigerians that are abroad are behaving badly in a foreign land," he said. "It's not good."

"South Africans are welcoming to foreigners based on what I've seen. If you say South Africans are bad people, it's not all of them. As a documented foreigner if you go to the bank, you will get a loan. In Nigeria where we are from, before you get a loan or credit card, you will suffer. Look, Nigerians can be wicked. The behaviour of some Nigerians to foreigners is terrible. There were some people who went to pay *lobola* with a fake cheque. Is that alright? If we're condemning South Africans, let's talk about the other side."

But James, the spice seller, disputes the notion that Nigerians are responsible for criminal enterprise in South Africa. He attributes the fixation on Nigerians to two reasons: one, he agrees with Adeyemi that all English-speaking foreigners are considered Nigerian. But he also believes there's a less obvious but seemingly sinister reason behind the fixation on Nigerians: that there is a general dislike of African migrants in this country while non-African foreigners move within society unnoticed and without restrictions.

"Let's call a spade a spade. Yes, Nigerians are doing bad things here. But let's talk about the

Pakistanis, Bangladeshi and Chinese."

And James believes the business of drug-dealing continues to flourish due to the complicity and reticence of state actors to eradicate the problem. "Who's working in the police station, is it me? Who's working at the airports and borders, is it me?"

"If the government doesn't want these drugs to happen in this country, they can get up and do it. Government has the power to stop this, because nobody is above the government. Let the government stand up against drugs. Why are people looting shops and saying they are fighting drugs?

"They say Nigerians are doing human trafficking. How? Nigerians don't do human trafficking in this country. Yes, we have bad people but you cannot use one finger to condemn the whole five fingers. It doesn't work like that."

James's argument perhaps also illustrates how ordinary South Africans and foreigners have lost faith in the governing system to function. There are corrupt elements within the police and security agencies, and it is the belief of many like James, that they are working in cahoots with drug dealers. When the system fails to work as it is supposed to, and ordinary citizens feel they're not being listened to or that the system is rigged against them, it is almost inevitable that they will lash out. Politicians, the media, and other establishment actors have told South Africans that their woes are the fault of immigrants coming to steal their jobs and benefits, and the dog-whistles have become loud enough. The violence and negativity towards foreigners is the natural culmination of a yearslong campaign to demonise outsiders.

Inequality and despair

It is not controversial to point out that South Africa has not lived up to its post-apartheid promise. Even in a world that is fundamentally skewed in favour of the moneyed elites, South Africa stands out for its extreme inequality. The World Bank called it the world's most unequal society (Sulla & Zikhali, 2018). In 1994, Mandela called for a redistribution of wealth to right the inequalities of apartheid but instead the gap has only grown to unimaginable heights.

South Africa scores poorly on every major metric for measuring inequality. And the statistics

make for grim reading. Income inequality, the gap between the highest and lowest paid worker, is high.

Victor Sulla, the lead author of the World Bank report, explained the situation to America's National Public Radio: "The people at the bottom in South Africa, they get wages comparable to the people who live in Bangladesh. It's very, very poor. Wages of less than $50 a month," Sulla says. "If you take the top ten percent, they live like in Austria. So, it's very high level even by European standards or even by U.S. standards. And we are talking just about employees, people who are getting paid. And not the super-rich who are earning income from factories or property or other investments".

Wealth inequality is also a major problem. The top 1 percent of the population own 70.9 percent of the wealth in this country. By contrast, the bottom 60 percent collectively own only 7 percent of the resources. South Africans living below the national poverty line have been increasing since 2011, according to Statistics South Africa. The government agency records show about 35.1 million or 49.2 percent of the adult population live on less than $70 a month.

As with most things in South Africa, poverty is sharply divided along racial lines. Nearly half of the country's black population live below the poverty line. For white people, the number is less than 1 percent. South Africa often feels as though it were two different countries. Nothing encapsulates these different realities more than Sandton and Alexandra township, two areas of Johannesburg that are in proximity. Sandton is well-known for the wealth domiciled in it while Alexandra is a world away with its poverty and cluttered living spaces.

The reasons for enduring poverty are many. The legacy of apartheid means that wealth, particularly land ownership, largely remains in the hands of white people despite their small population size. But in post-apartheid South Africa, the greed and corruption of politicians, mostly from the ruling African National Congress (ANC) have compounded the woes facing poor people. Top officials, including former President Jacob Zuma, face allegations of diverting the nation's wealth into private control.

With poverty rife and unemployment at 30.8 percent, the race for scarce resources is even tighter than ever. And without fail, the conversation leads to immigrants who are accused of being responsible for a shortage of jobs. Never mind that immigrants themselves are much

more likely to be unemployed and just as poor as those accusing them of various offences.

Churchill, the elderly cobbler in Hillbrow who has lived here for 25 years, says although he hasn't been treated badly because of his nationality, he believes South Africans generally do not play well with foreigners.

"Individuals here don't feel comfortable with you as a foreigner," he said.

"Anything you do to live a good life, they feel jealous about it. This type of job that I'm doing [mending shoes] they cannot do it. But being a foreigner, you will do it so that you can put food on the table. The people of the country, they can't do that job. Maybe they will feel ashamed of doing it but they still feel jealous of you."

Scapegoats

The first big wave of xenophobic attacks hit in 2008. Before that, there were only sporadic attacks that were easily ignored. But 2008 was a different kettle of fish, too large in its scale and casualty figures to simply ignore. More than 60 people, including 21 South Africans, were killed in the 2008 violence that began in Alexandra township, Johannesburg, before spreading to seven of South Africa's nine provinces, according to Human Rights Watch's 2008 report on South Africa. More than 100,000 were reportedly displaced from their homes and settlement camps where they struggled to get by. The agitators demanded that foreigners leave the country, accusing them of a litany of offences ranging from committing crimes to taking jobs that should be held by South Africans. Ernesto Alfabeto Nhamuave, a Mozambican national, was beaten, stabbed and set on fire at the Ramaphosa township in Gauteng's East Rand region. He died from his injuries. His image, known as "The Burning Man", went around the world. No justice has been served in his case; no-one has ever been brought to account for his murder.

There was a further outbreak of violence in 2015. In Durban, the largest city in Kwazulu-Natal, at least seven people were killed and 5,000 displaced. One of those killed was a 14-year-old allegedly shot dead during a late-night looting of shops. Rioters in Durban attacked shops belonging to foreigners, who in turn took up arms to defend themselves. Reuters reported that a text message sent around the central business district in Johannesburg warned: "Zulu people are coming to town...to kill every foreigner on the road."

The violent attacks continued in 2019. The unrest began in a Johannesburg suburb during a march supposedly targeting foreign drug-dealers. Businesses belonging to foreigners were attacked in and around Johannesburg and Pretoria. Of the many shocking images that emerged from the turmoil, an image of two men carting away an entire vending machine was particularly striking.

At least five people were killed, with scores injured. There was harsh condemnation from across the continent.

Zambia, a close ally of South Africa, warned its lorry drivers to "avoid travelling to South Africa until the security situation improves" following the reported looting and torching of trucks and intimidation of foreign truck drivers. Its national football cancelled a friendly match against South Africa's men's team. So did Madagascar's.

Ethiopia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs condemned "the heinous act of violence perpetrated against foreigners including our citizens in South Africa". It warned its citizens to "distance themselves from any confrontation and conflict", close their shops if possible and avoid going out wearing expensive jewellery. Air Tanzania suspended flights to and from Johannesburg (Turkewitz, 2019).

In recent years, xenophobic attacks have targeted Somalians, Zimbabweans, Ethiopians, Nigerians, and many other African nationals. But the 2019 crisis strained South Africa's already flagging relations with Nigeria, its main rival for clout and economic power on the continent. Nigerian music stars Tiwa Savage and Burna Boy withdrew from major concerts. Nigeria pulled out of the World Economic Forum Africa Summit in Cape Town and recalled its ambassador to South Africa. It marked the worst deterioration of diplomatic ties between both countries in more than two decades. South African businesses in Nigeria were looted and vandalised in retaliation by angry youths. The supermarket chain Shoprite and telecoms giant MTN had their branches attacked. Both businesses closed shop in response.

Nigeria's foreign minister Geoffrey Onyeama led a delegation to Pretoria to address his country's concerns with South African President Cyril Ramaphosa. Onyeama called the

violence “sickening and depressing.” For its part, the South African government sent a team of special envoys led by Jeff Radebe, a former long-serving cabinet minister, to various countries whose nationals were affected by the violence. Radebe made a pit stop in Abuja, the Nigerian capital, where he met with President Muhammadu Buhari. Radebe offered his “sincerest apologies” and said that “the incident does not represent what South Africa stands for.” He added that the perpetrators of violence would be held accountable.

It’s hard to posit why Nigeria reacted to the 2019 attacks with more vigour than on previous occasions, especially as no Nigerian national was reported killed. But perhaps the events of Rosettenville just two years earlier had played a part in the country’s response. In 2017, rioters specifically singled out Nigerians in Rosettenville, a low-income Johannesburg suburb, for violence. Almost a dozen homes were torched and businesses belonging to Nigerians including nightclubs were attacked. The rationale for these attacks were by now depressingly familiar: the agitators claimed to be protecting their neighbourhoods from drug dealers and brothels.

Whatever the reason, Nigeria’s response in 2019 went even further than dispatching a diplomatic mission to Pretoria and pulling out of an economic summit. In an extraordinary and never-seen-before turn of events, Nigeria airlifted about 600 of its citizens from South Africa. The repatriation exercise was carried out by the privately-owned Nigerian airline AirPeace.

Many people who had built their lives in South Africa decided they had had enough and headed home with nothing to show for the many years they’d spent away from home. Some went back with children who spoke English with a South African accent and had never even visited their parents’ home country.

The Nigerian Consulate in Illovo, Johannesburg called on those who wanted to go back to show up at a centre to assess their eligibility for the scheme. One of those who showed up in September 2019 was Taofeek Rashid.

Gone in 24 hours

Taofeek Rashid is a slender, soft-spoken man. We met recently on a Friday morning with pelting rain, the aftermath of the tropical storm Eloise tearing through southern Africa and depositing huge rain along the way. He’s dressed in his greasy work overalls that instantly give

away that he's an auto mechanic. We met at his workshop, a large yard filled with cars at various stages of completion and young men speaking in a variety of languages. You can hear Yoruba, the language of the Yoruba people of southwestern Nigeria, and a mix of South African languages as well.

Rashid's workshop is in Cleveland, about 30 minutes from the centre of Johannesburg. It shares a fence with an ice cream company and a security guard is stationed at the gate waving cars in. The drive to Cleveland is notable for a few reasons. The closer I got to the workshop, the worse the condition of the roads got, the smooth and wide roads giving way to much narrower and less pristine roads. There were overgrown bushes and the streets were lined with several buildings in various stages of dilapidation. But generally, the surroundings hummed with activity in a suburb that has now become a light industrial area of the city.

Rashid, 45, left Nigeria for South Africa in November 2004. Like many others before him, he told me he was seeking greener pastures. "I just decided to leave for a better life. That's why I left," he said. He was working as an auto-mechanic in Asaba, Delta state in Nigeria's oil-rich Niger Delta region before he left. Rashid had a friend already living in South Africa who told him auto mechanics were in high demand. Find your way here, Rashid said the friend told him. And he had secured a job for him at BMW, the exact type of cars Rashid was an expert at, he said. That job offer turned out to be a lie; there was nothing waiting for him in South Africa. Rashid was jobless in his first month in South Africa, but soon he found work as a barber, living in a shared room with five other immigrants in Hillbrow. The rent was R150 each per month. Within a year, he'd teamed up with a Zimbabwean national at a roadside mechanic shop. But the relationship between both men turned sour soon enough; Rashid thought his boss considered him a threat because of how much praise he was getting from customers. "He had to chase me away."

Rashid had saved enough money during his two years to start out again — he'd spent his money buying tools. In 2006, he found someone to share a workshop with at Jules Street in southern Johannesburg. His new partner, Jeff, a panel beater, was a fellow immigrant from Nigeria who had been in South Africa since 2002. In addition to fixing cars for quick repairs, Rashid got into the business of buying cars damaged in accidents, patching them up and selling on for a profit. With time the car-flipping venture became his biggest source of income. He made enough money to bring his girlfriend, Ifeoma, who he'd left behind in Asaba in pursuit of a better life, to South Africa. They got married in 2008 and had three kids as their family grew.

Life was good.

Rashid was in South Africa during the violent crisis of 2008 and 2015 and was aware of how dangerous things could turn. But he had never been personally affected. Then came 2019 and everything changed.

The events of a Sunday morning in September 2019 are forever etched in Rashid's memory. He takes the story from there in horrifying detail.

"When they started fighting that they didn't want foreigners, they started from my shop in Jules. They burnt more than four cars in my workshop. I had eight cars. They destroyed some of my customers' cars. I had to run for my life. I had to jump the fence to the other side. I stayed in the toilet for more than one hour 30 minutes before my people came to rescue me and took me home.

"I didn't think this would happen. I had been with these people for years. The first xenophobia, I was there. That happened in 2008, I was there. They didn't attack me, they said my shop is safe because I'm not doing illegal things and I'm not selling drugs. They know that I'm doing my own work. When 2019 happened, I didn't even think they would come to my side. I went out and when I came back, I saw they had burnt my neighbour's house. My wife and kids were at home and I had to run to my shop to check if anything was happening.

"I got to the shop, the attackers met me there at the shop. These were some Zulu people that came from a shack house behind my shop. They came there and started shouting and saying they didn't want foreigners. At first, we thought they were playing and were still trying to pack our cars. Before we knew it, they started attacking us. They broke one of my brother's [he's referring to a fellow Nigerian immigrant] head and arm. It was a terrible experience. I had to jump the fence and run away. I was peeping in the toilet and seeing how they were breaking the cars. They burnt four cars."

Jules Street was one of the epicentres of the violence in 2019. The rioters did not spare South African-owned businesses in their rampage. A Pep store in the area was razed to the ground and a Shoprite outlet was one of the many shops that were looted.

Beyond the destruction and loss and violence, Rashid also feels an acute sense of betrayal, of a

bond broken. The people who destroyed his business and threatened his life were men he knew from the neighbourhood, people he considered, if not friends, necessarily, but acquaintances. The type of people you greet in the street with a nod and share the occasional beer with if the chance presented itself. These were the people who ruined his life.

With his workshop burnt and his faith in South Africa irreversibly broken, Rashid decided he had had enough and wanted to go home. He didn't think there was anything left for him here. "I owned that workshop for more than 13 years and they destroyed it in one day," he said.

He made his way to the Nigerian Consulate in Illovo with his wife and kids to be processed for a flight back to Nigeria, but the family had an unforeseen problem: his wife was heavily pregnant and Consulate officials told them she wouldn't be allowed to make the journey in her condition. Rashid was deflated all over again.

Buffeted on all sides, Rashid felt stuck and went three months without a job. Feeding his family was hard, and so was making rent. To further complicate matters, his wife gave birth to twin boys a month after the incident. Their family had grown at perhaps the worst possible time for all involved. But when it all seemed lost, Rashid and his family found solace in the kindness of strangers. "People came to support us. From Pretoria, they gave us some gifts, gave us some money and we started managing our lives. Nigerians and South Africans helped us."

For Rashid's wife, Ifeoma, who moved to South Africa in 2008 to study for a diploma at Vaal University of Technology, the attack remains her one enduring memory of this country. "It was a great disaster to me, my husband and my children," she said.

She credits God and the community that rallied around them for seeing them through. "I was heavily pregnant and I just thank God I didn't have a miscarriage. It was hectic for me. The shop was burnt with the cars. Even the car he bought for me was burnt. We had to start afresh. When I delivered my twins, it was someone who helped us to pay the hospital bills because my husband had nothing."

The attack on his workshop made Rashid swap Jules Street for this yard in Cleveland where a security guard stands at the gate and waves people in. "It's very safe here. If they don't authorise you to come in, you can't come. Your customers' cars are safe. Business is going slowly but I know we'll get there one day."

Before he became a victim of xenophobic violence, Rashid said he liked living in South Africa, because unlike in Nigeria, artisans are greatly appreciated here. “In Nigeria, we don’t value hand work. We believe people doing hard work are all illiterate. South Africa values what I’m doing here and that’s why I’m still here.”

But the events of 2019 have dramatically altered his outlook on South Africa. Now he worries about random encounters with strangers on the street. “If you see three people approaching, you’re afraid maybe they’ll attack you.”

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Rashid and his family are now looking to relocate elsewhere and leave South Africa behind. “We’re trying to relocate because from what I can see in the future, life is not safer here. Where you’re living, you’re living in fear.” Where to? “It’s better for me to relocate to Canada or Europe or anywhere else in the western world.”

Why not Nigeria? After all, he was keen on going back to Nigeria, admittedly out of desperation, in 2019. “I can’t relocate back to Nigeria,” he said with a hearty laugh.

“Where am I going to start from? I can’t relocate back to Nigeria because of my kids.”

Rashid has five kids — all boys — and says he cannot go back to Nigeria because he wants them to have a better life he reckons Nigeria cannot offer them.

“I want to secure a better future for them. I know if I eventually go back to Nigeria, I know I would have secured their future. They can go to better schools and chase their dreams. My second son says he wants to be an aeroplane engineer. I have to work towards it for him. That’s my plan for him.” His wife, Ifeoma, agrees. “I don’t think they can adapt to the system in Nigeria because they were not born there and I want my kids to have a bright future.”

Ifeoma says she’s at a loss as to why the South African government did not financially compensate people who were affected by the violence. And as for the relocation plans, she wants out “as soon as possible.”

“I don’t like the xenophobia,” she said. “When people work they come and destroy. It’s like we’re working for them. It’s not good. They don’t like us [foreigners].”

Rashid and his family live in Malvern East, and his wife says of the place: “It’s not safer. If we had money, we should’ve relocated to a nicer place.”

Jelili Elegbede is Rashid’s business partner at this Cleveland workshop. The duo met in Nigeria at a mechanic workshop when Elegbede lent Rashid a spanner. But they lost touch and reconnected here in South Africa, years later, when they ran into each other in Jules Street and acknowledged they both looked familiar.

Like many others, Elegbede attempted to go elsewhere — Germany in his case — before landing in South Africa in 2005. The driving force behind his exit from Nigeria was just how acute the class divide was, and how people without well-to-do parents or vital connections in society are often left without a support system. “Everybody knows the situation in Nigeria that if you don’t belong, you don’t belong. If your parents are not rich, you as a child must work hard. And I want my family down there to have something to eat; that’s what brought me to South Africa.”

The class implication Elegbede speaks of is evident in Masade’s work *Imagining the City: Memories and Cultures in Cape Town,* with many migrants interviewed for that study saying they also left Nigeria because of how they thought the system was inherently stacked against them.
Elegbede worked at a workshop owned by a fellow Nigerian, Sunny, for a few years where he earned R350 a week. He saved R100 each week and amassed enough to start a small workshop on his own at Jules Street in 2010. Elegbede, who says he did not know anything about South Africa before getting here, now says it is “terrible.”

I asked him: What do you mean by "terrible"?

“This country there’s killing and robbing people. Bad, bad things. If they know you’re not from here, the way they treat you is bad,” he explained.

I pressed further: And have you been treated badly because you’re not from here?

“Ah, I can’t count it. If a citizen of South Africa knows you’re not from here, the way they’ll be treating you is bad. Everybody knows it.”

Elegbede says he was unscathed during the xenophobic attacks of 2008 but he wasn't so lucky in 2019.

"They broke into our workshop. Our clients' cars were burnt and they stole equipment. They set fire on things in the workshop. It started at about 3 or 4 am in the morning. We couldn't go there to save our workshop because they were too much and the police were there doing nothing."

And like Rashid, Elegbede was left with nothing. The two bonded over their shared misery and nationality, and a partnership grew out of the chaos. Today, they run this workshop together in Cleveland and are slowly getting their feet back on their feet.

Going back home when the repatriation offer came was not an option for Elegbede, who said he did not want to go back home with "nothing." "I couldn't go," he said. "My family expects me to come with something. Being here for 15 years, going back home empty-handed, sounds somehow."

That line of thinking isn't uncommon among immigrants. There is enormous familial pressure on those abroad to make something of themselves and simply packing it up when the chips are down isn't appealing to many people, even when it is obvious that they could perhaps be best served by going home as Elegbede admits.

"Some of my friends that are left in Nigeria, they are doing better than me. Here in South Africa, if you work, the little thing you see, rent takes it. You pay the rent at home and in the shop. You take care of your kid and there's nothing left. The little money you make can't solve your bills in a month. But I cannot just go home like that.

"If I say I'm going back home, what business can I do? Where will I start from? Where's the money to start my own business because when I get back home, people in Nigeria are expecting me to come with something. Even if they know there's a problem in the country that you are, they still expect you to come with something. If I go back home, I need to establish a business, like this mechanic work I'm doing. I must buy some tools and make it like yeah, I come from somewhere. My business must look international but the money is not there. What can I do? That's why I did not go in 2019."

In a different class

Class is an unavoidable topic in every society and it undoubtedly affects how foreigners experience their new countries. Professionals like doctors, lawyers and other highly regarded occupations are generally welcome in polite society. It's safe to say that Rashid and Elegbede's workshops would have been spared the violence if they were neatly tucked away in leafy suburbs far from low-income areas where these incidents tend to occur.

Babatunde Fagbayibo came to South Africa as a wide-eyed 20-year-old in 2002. He grew up middle class in Akure, Ondo state in southwestern Nigeria. He was a second-year student at the University of Ibadan, studying Special Education. He'd always wanted to be a lawyer and his father told him he could move to South Africa to get a law degree. The decision to come to the country was mostly his father's and a quirk of the academic calendar meant that South Africa was his only realistic option at the time. (South African schools start the school year in January/February and that was when Fagbayibo wanted to move).

"The only thing I knew about South Africa was apartheid. Growing up in Nigeria, there's no way you wouldn't have South Africa in your consciousness, especially in the early 90s. My knowledge of South Africa was also shaped by the way in which Nigerian politicians and the military government would speak about Mandela. Many Nigerian musicians sang about Mandela, people like Majek Fashek. I didn't have a scholarly knowledge or anything, that came as a result of me now living here, interacting with South African students and friends, and studying law."

Fagbayibo studied for his undergraduate law degree at the University of South Africa (Unisa) through the Midrand Graduate Institute. He studied for a master's in law at the University of Pretoria from 2006 to 2007. In April 2007, he began his doctorate degree at the University of Pretoria. By September 2010, he had his PhD. For eight consecutive years, Fagbayibo was deeply embedded in South Africa's educational system, navigating his way from undergraduate law student to a doctorate degree. Just as he was wrapping up his PhD, Fagbayibo had interviewed for and landed a job as a senior lecturer at Unisa. The experience he garnered as a part-time lecturer at the Midrand Graduate Institute during his days as a PhD candidate stood him in good stead. Going back to Nigeria wasn't on the cards for him, because he had a job lined up as his education wound down. But even without the job offer, Nigeria wasn't in the

picture for him. It was here or moving elsewhere.

“Maybe if I hadn’t gotten a job and I couldn’t leave here for anywhere else and my options were extremely limited, I might have gone back to Nigeria.”

These days Fagbayibo can be found in his new role as a full-time professor of law at Unisa where he teaches international law, trade law and human rights, having risen through the ranks since he started there in 2012. It’s a remarkable story of a steady rise, from undergraduate law student to law professor, via stops as a senior lecturer and associate professor, now teaching undergraduate and postgraduate students, and supervising PhD students in areas of constitutional democracy, regional integration, and international economic law. In his spare time, he writes poems and short stories.

Fagbayibo, who joined me on Zoom from Pretoria, speaks in clear and lucid sentences. He puts emphasis on words when he’s trying to make a point and you can hear his professorial attitude shine through.

Fagbayibo credits South Africa for his growth. After all, at 39, he has now spent almost exactly half his life in this country.

“Part of my growth, even my intellectual growth, I credit it to this country because I’ve been a student and a professor. And the university has given me the opportunity to grow intellectually in the system. South Africa offers some of the best access to resources in terms of things you need to do your work as a researcher, with very well stocked libraries and access to paper and online resources. All of the things you would need to grow as an academic. I also enjoy the infrastructure: the good roads, electricity.”

But he’s aware of his privilege even as an immigrant in South African society. He has been ensconced in academia for all of his time in this country, either as a student or professor. It is a privilege I am aware of myself, being a student at one of the country’s most elite institutions of higher learning.

“My story might be different from someone else who has been here for 19 years. Maybe one has been privileged enough to exist in an environment where I can talk about access to research infrastructure.

“I’m also a big fan of the culture, especially the music from Miriam Makeba straight to amapiano. I consume South African arts and culture. The series, the movies and all of those things. I’ve also made very good friends in this country. Almost half of my life has been spent in this country. I owe this country gratitude. There are things that frustrate me but generally I can say that South Africa has been good to me.”

But despite his own admission that South Africa has been great for him, Fagbayibo is frustrated by xenophobia — or “Afrophobia” as he calls it — that he calls one of the “disappointing elements” of post-apartheid South Africa. “There’s no foreigner who would say they don’t have stories to tell. I move in circles of professional Nigerians and friends who tell their stories either in their workplace or just living in society. That frustrates me.

“Racism as well. It doesn’t sit well with me. When we come from Nigeria where we don’t have that I always tell South Africans that it took me a long time to understand overt and covert racism in South Africa because I never experienced it. But I’ve been here for 19 years now, I know all forms of racism, both overt and covert.”

“But my biggest concern is Afrophobia and xenophobia. It’s such a sad commentary on pan-African relations and South Africa’s position as a leading country.”
“I’ve had encounters with South African police where immediately they see that you’re carrying a Nigerian passport, there’s a change in tone. I’ve been stopped before where the police came all guns blazing and told me to open my boot. All of these happened when they found out I was Nigerian. I could tell stories of experiences in general life or even in social occasions. I was at an event where I was introduced as Nigerian and a South African came to tell me we were the ones who brought poverty and all forms of social ills to this country. It’s very painful. Regardless of any status you have, the fact that you experience it is still painful. The pain of being othered, of not being judged by the content of your character or what you do.

“In 2011, I was staying with a friend, another academic. The police came and told us neighbours had complained that drugs might have been in our house. We had to show them our cards and told them we were professionals who worked at the university. And the police apologised. All of these are painful experiences.”

As Fagbayibo explains it, xenophobia is not limited to acts of violence. There have been instances where people tell him straight to his face that "they don't trust Nigerians".

"I already carry the stigma of being Nigerian and so I try not to do anything that would put me in trouble. I renew my [driver's] license on time and never drive without a license just to make sure you're never caught in the web."

Fagbayibo's hyper-vigilence is something I am familiar with. With Covid-19 restrictions, including a curfew in place, I am never out during those hours. I have South African friends who question why I'm particular about sticking to the government's enforced hours, and I always explain that I don't want to be the immigrant, particularly the Nigerian one, who is caught flouting the rules.

"You're judged for being Nigerian before you're judged for your qualifications or contributions you make to the economy," said Fagbayibo.

Man and wife

Much has been said and written about Nigerian immigrants in South Africa. Yet, little is known about them that is actually rooted in fact. With immigrants from Zimbabwe and the rest of southern Africa, there is often a shared language and the cultures are not so dissimilar.
A theme that emerges from speaking to almost two dozen Nigerians for this project is that they are insular. There is almost a deliberate aversion to mix and integrate with their South African hosts on a deeper level. Of everyone I interviewed, only one fluently speaks a South African language. Tajudeen Adeyemi, the shop owner in Hillbrow who deals in mobile devices speaks Zulu, Xhosa and has a basic knowledge of Afrikaans. On the day I interviewed him, he was interrupted multiple times by customers who spoke to him mostly in Zulu. Language remains one of the most important ways of integration for migrants and in a country like South Africa, where local languages are spoken regularly, not understanding the language seems to be a failing on the part of immigrants, many of whom have lived here for up to 20 years.

Olubunmi Ogunsanwo, a Nigerian immigration lawyer based in Pretoria, told me she picked up Xhosa during her time in the Eastern Cape when her husband, a doctor, was based in a rural hospital. But since the couple moved to Pretoria, she has found almost no need to speak or learn the language, and her skills have gone rusty. She lives in a gated complex in Pretoria and works in professional circles where communicating in English is enough to get by.

A high-level player who spoke on the condition of anonymity also said Nigerians tend not to mingle socially with South Africans and often don't go out of their comfort zone. This individual straddles the world of business between the two countries. It's worth asking if Nigerians are reluctant to socialise with South Africans because they fear they will be judged anyway by people who they think already have negative views about them. It is perhaps an unresolvable point, a chicken and egg discussion of international relations.

Ogunsanwo, who has lived in South Africa since 2000 when she joined her husband who was already living here, says she has "only about two or three South African friends." "And even those friends you might not see them in months and we talk on the phone. I don't have close South African friends that I can say through them I learned the culture." It's the same for Ifeoma, Rashid's wife, who says she has friends in her majority Nigerian church.

Food is another way immigrants can gain a cultural immersion in their host community. But almost all the subjects interviewed for this project say they regularly consume Nigerian food (Ogunsanwo says she and her husband eat Nigerian food "99.9 percent" of the time and South African meals are only on the menu three or four times a year).

But one area of Nigerian-South African relations that is flourishing is romantic relationships. This should come as no surprise. The vast majority of Nigerian immigrants in South Africa are male and it stands to reason that they will get married or be romantically involved with women in this country. A recent study showed that the rate of marriages between middle/upper middle class Nigerian men and South African women is growing.

Indeed, the phenomenon is now increasingly widespread that there is a school of thought in South Africa that Nigerian men are "taking [our] South African women." Fagbayibo, the university professor, says that framing takes agency away from women who decide to be involved with Nigerian men. "You're trying to say women are kids who cannot make decisions, they have to be stolen, they have to be taken by foreigners. It's misogynistic, it's everything toxic rolled into one," he said.

The reasons for these relationships range from true love and affection, down to the opportunistic or practical, however you choose to look at it. Churchill, the 71-year-old cobbler in Hillbrow, told me he got married to a South African woman when his asylum application

was rejected and he needed a way to legally remain in the country. It's unclear if they're still together but Churchill is a South African citizen these days.

A couple, who talked to me on the condition of anonymity, met at a wedding in 2009. They have been together ever since. The Nigerian man, 55, said he was warmly received by his partner's family. The South African woman said she was not concerned about his nationality and was not dissuaded by the stereotypes of Nigerians as drug dealers and criminals.

"I am very open-minded," the woman said. "I have travelled a lot and interacted with people from different walks of life. For me, where you come from is never an issue. The issue would be from the person. I love people in general and I don't think people are not good because of where they come from. I'd met Nigerians prior to meeting him, I had Nigerian friends, I knew about the Nigerian culture. And generally, I like Nigerian people."

But still, she says she gets comments from people who question her decision to be with a Nigerian man.

"I remember once I was introduced to a lady by a friend and my friend said 'Oh, her partner is Nigerian." She said to me: "Are you not scared he'll take you to Nigeria and make you a drug mule or he'll take you for human trafficking? Are you not scared?"

"I have someone in my workplace who told me they don't like Nigerian men. You have people my age, who are still very xenophobic. It doesn't matter their exposure or whether they're learned. You do still find some people that are still xenophobic. It's not many people but there are."

During my Zoom conversation with the couple on a recent Saturday morning, there was an element of a culture clash that became clear. The woman said her Nigerian partner could be "boastful" in a way that rubs up South Africans, who are generally reserved, the wrong way. As a Nigerian, this is an observation I can attest to. In a country of more than 180 million people, standing out is often necessary to make a headway in life and many people develop outsized personalities and exude confidence in a way that can be quite grating. The woman mentioned an incident at a restaurant where her partner had a legitimate complaint about the spoon a waiter gave him but she felt he was too abrasive in how he went about the issue. "I just want him to be nicer," she said.

(A Nigerian I spoke to put it this way: “In terms of our lifestyle, we like showing off. Anywhere you are, they’ll know you’re Nigerian. We’re not humble people, we’re proud people by nature”).

Michael and Tiyinko Aina are another Nigerian-South African couple I interviewed. They met as members of the church choir in 2016 and have been married for three years. When I spoke to them in early January, the couple had just welcomed their second child together. Tiyinko, 28, said she had heard stories about Nigerians before she met Michael but because they met in church and she’d closely observed him, she had no worries about getting married to him. Her family, however, wasn’t so sure.

“It was tough convincing my parents that he was a good person because they had heard a lot of stories,” she told me.

“It wasn’t easy. I had to convince my mother but they finally accepted because it was my choice. For me, I was fine. I prayed a lot about it and I never doubted him that he was a good person.

“My mum watches a lot of Nigerian movies and she wanted to know if he did the terrible things they show in movies. She was just comparing him to what she sees in movies: all the rituals and bad things, but I convinced her that he was different and she gave in.”

The Ainas, who live in a complex with a large yard where children were playing when I visited, say there have been instances where their children have been treated differently on the playground due to their Nigerian heritage. “I just advise them to choose their friends wisely,” Tiyinko said.

“They call them funny names because they’re Nigerian and I just tell them to choose friends who accept them. Whatever they’re Nigerian or South African, they’re all Africans. I tell them to stay away from kids who say bad things about them so it will not affect them.”

At the core of the situation in which the Ainas’ kids find themselves is migrant identity. The kids are of dual nationalities but it seems they are not fully seen as South Africans by their playmates. It begs the question of what makes one South African or any other nationality for that

matter? By South African law, an individual born to at least one parent who is a South African citizen is automatically one themself. By naturalisation, an individual becomes a citizen after five years as a permanent resident of this country. But migrant identity, the question of where a person belongs to is a complex question, one not easily resolved by paperwork or length of stay in any particular country. According to a recent study on migration and identity, migrants generally take on the identity of their host country the longer they stay there and improve their economic prospects, but they continue to "maintain (parts of) their heritage culture and transnational ties with the home country no matter how long they have stayed in the new country." (Fong et al, 2016).

Duelling identities

I recently spoke to Priscilla, a 24-year-old doctor from Nigeria, who agreed to speak to me on the condition that I use a pseudonym for her. She recently graduated from the University of the Witwatersrand's medical school and works as an intern at a public hospital in Johannesburg. Priscilla moved to South Africa at the end of 2005 aged nine when her father, a reinsurer, was transferred from the Nigeria office to the head office in Johannesburg. Priscilla was due to begin high school (secondary school) in Nigeria when the family moved but was told by the school system here she was too young to be in high school; she went through grade 4 to 7 instead. ("Initially, I did not appreciate it because it felt like I was being demoted but when I look back at it, it allowed me to mature emotionally and learn with my peers and my education wasn't rushed," she says of her early education).

The move at such a young age was a culture shock for Priscilla, the youngest of the subjects interviewed for this project.

"Everything was different," she said over Zoom one recent Thursday afternoon.

"But the greatest shock was the ease of life in South Africa compared to Nigeria. In Nigeria there is basically no electricity and everyone owns a generator. But here you don't have to plan your day so much in advance, you don't have to wake up at a ridiculous time to put on the generator. There are barely any potholes here either. People like to think the potholes here are ridiculous but they're really not."

Even the weather was a total shock for Priscilla, moving from a mostly tropical Nigeria to South Africa and its temperate climate. "The fact that there was a winter was different because

in Nigeria, we don't have winter!"

Unsurprisingly for a nine-year-old, she did not know much about the country she was moving to except for one thing: that there was a substantial number of people living with HIV at the time. This was the era of health minister Manto Tshabalala-Msimang promoting beetroot, garlic and lemon as potential cures for a disease that was causing needless deaths around the country. According to a Harvard University study, about 300,000 people died of HIV/Aids, a legacy of the lackadaisical handling of the epidemic by President Thabo Mbeki (Chigwedere et al, 2008). Priscilla and I are similar in age and my own knowledge of South Africa at the time came from watching the men's national football team, Bafana Bafana, who were considered rivals to Nigeria's own Super Eagles.

Going abroad is often the first time Nigerians have to consciously identify as black. After all, when you come from the world's most populous black nation, seeing yourself as black comes by default. It was the same for Priscilla when she moved to South Africa.

"Seeing so many different races of people was different because in Nigeria everyone is pretty much black. In Nigeria, I never considered race as a problem or any racial tensions because it doesn't exist. I became conscious of race when I got here. It was fascinating until I found out about apartheid and South Africa's deeply rooted racial issues." she said.

But Priscilla tells me she has not personally experienced any discrimination due to being black, instead, she says, she has faced gender discrimination, mostly in the hospital.

"I needed to do a procedure for one of the male patients and he refused because he wanted a male doctor to attend to him. But the male doctor told the patient only I would be allowed to attend to him and then the patient agreed."

And of course being Nigerian, she says she has faced discrimination based on her nationality. She became aware of how Nigerians are perceived in South Africa the older she got. "It's annoying, at best it's annoying. The first time I noticed was at the airport when they did extra checks because we were Nigerian. We were travelling to Nigeria for the first time since coming to South Africa and they did another round of checks despite the fact we'd already been checked before and they weren't doing this to other people, only the Nigerians. It's happened again and again.

“On the radio you hear people saying ‘Nigerians are taking our women’. But women are not objects. Your women want them. These are stupid things that are annoying. Also, when you tell people you’re Nigerian, they ask if you know about the 419 [scammers] or just ask you really weird questions.”

“I meet people, make friends just like anyone else. I do not make friends with just Nigerians and honestly apart from family friends, I probably don’t even have Nigerian friends. It doesn’t confine me to a certain ethnicity of people or races of people, I have friends from all over.”

Priscilla is different from those I interviewed for this project, primarily because of her age. She came as a nine-year-old, essentially a blank slate in terms of her personality and development. She has grown into an adult in South Africa, and after spending 15 formative years in this country, could be considered South African. Indeed, she will soon have a passport to show for it. On paper and for all intents and purposes, Priscilla is a South African citizen. But that’s the extent of how much she identifies with this country. She still introduces herself as Nigerian and feels a close affinity to a country she barely knew when she departed.

“I’m fully Nigerian. I’m South African on paper but I was born Nigerian. It’s something I will never deny. I will always be Nigerian first. I still see myself as Nigerian and can’t call myself South African. I always say I have South African citizenship but not that I’m South African. But I think Nigerians see me as South African because I sound differently.” (It’s hard to miss that Priscilla’s accent sounds noticeably different to mine when we talked, but it’s not necessarily South African. It’s closer to a British accent.)

Nonetheless, Priscilla appreciates the ease being a South African citizen brings to her life.

“Having a South African passport is so much easier to deal with than a Nigerian passport, I have to be honest. Having a Nigerian passport puts a target on your back, it makes people suspicious of you from the onset at the airport and even just applying for a visa with a Nigerian passport is difficult. I like almost everything about living in South Africa.”

Like most Nigerians interviewed for this project, Priscilla doesn’t speak South African languages either: “The languages were also difficult to grasp and honestly still so difficult to grasp. You’d think I know how to speak the languages but I don’t.” As a doctor working in a

public hospital, it's a gap in her overall skill set that is sorely lacking.

"Most people who come to the public hospital are black and speak their native South African language. And because I'm black too, they expect that I speak it too. It becomes a problem when I'm trying to explain what's going to happen in surgery to a patient and they don't understand English, and can only speak Zulu or Xhosa. It happened yesterday for a woman that needed to go to theatre urgently. And for someone to go to surgery they need to understand what's going to happen to them. I couldn't explain to her in Zulu and she didn't understand in English, eventually I had to find someone who could speak her language. It always bothers me."

But if Priscilla still identifies as Nigerian despite her South African citizenship, it's a different story for Ogunsanwo's two kids. The Pretoria-based immigration lawyer's two children, 19 and 16, were born in South Africa and hold dual citizenship of Nigeria and South Africa (Ogunsanwo and her husband, who is also Nigerian, are also dual citizens).

"They know that they're from Nigeria but when you talk to them they feel they're more South African than Nigerian," she says of her children.

Ogunsanwo says her children generally don't eat Nigerian food — especially the younger child who she describes as a "picky eater." When the family visited Nigeria three years ago, Ogunsanwo's 16-year-old daughter complained about the quality of the food compared to the fare she was used to in South Africa. The younger child isn't keen on visiting Nigeria either, often complaining about, among other things, the traffic in Lagos, the hot weather, and the lack of electricity that means generators hum loudly around the city.

The 19-year-old, a second-year university student, understands Afrikaans and the younger child is "doing very well" in language classes at school. "She can speak and she understands very well but I wouldn't say fluently because we don't speak it at home," Ogunsanwo said.

The children's reported flair for language is a marked departure from the adults I spoke to for this project, most of whom do not understand South African languages and acknowledge their failure to do so.

Half a loaf is better than none

A common theme emerged while reporting this project. Of all the almost two dozen adults I spoke to, only two indicated they were willing to return to Nigeria in the near future. A young engineer, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, has been unemployed since he graduated from his master's programme at the University of Pretoria. The coronavirus pandemic has frustrated his job-hunting efforts in South Africa and he is now looking to migrate to Canada, a country that has proactively opened its doors to migrants around the world and has become a destination of choice for educated Nigerians in recent years. The 30-year-old engineer told me that in the unlikely event his Canadian dreams don't pan out, he'll move back to Nigeria. Either way, he expects to be out of South Africa in the next two years. The other respondent, Pretoria-based doctor Onyemaobi, says he is planning towards an exit in five years. At 51, he is thinking of his retirement. The plan, he says, is to shuttle between Nigeria, South Africa and the United States, where his wife, a dentist, and kids migrated to in 2020. The overwhelming majority of my respondents have no interest in a move back home, at least not any time soon. Many of them have established relatively stable lives in South Africa and for all the slights — real or imagined — they receive in this country due to their nationality, they have accepted that it is much better to live here than in Nigeria. Those with migration plans want to move on further to the West; Nigeria is completely out of the question.

Michael Aina, my barber, first came to South Africa in 2014 for a short course before returning in 2016. In the intervening period, he visited Dubai and Kenya, and concluded South Africa was the place for him, after deciding that Nigeria was "hell." "Of all the countries I have been to, South Africa seems to be the best in terms of the culture, the food and the people," he said. Although Aina is eyeing a move to the United States at some point, he says South Africa is "home" for him now.

It may defy logic that Nigerians want to continue living in a country where they are not always welcome but one only needs to look at the current state of their own country to understand why going back isn't an option that many would entertain.

If South Africa has yet to reach the heights expected of it post-apartheid, Nigeria has squandered all the promise it had at its independence. When Nigeria gained independence from the United Kingdom in 1960, it was expected that it would become a beacon for what newly independent African states were capable of. But instead a series of military coups, a devastating three-year civil war and rampant corruption have hindered meaningful progress. Nigeria today

is beset by significant problems on multiple fronts. A recent editorial says "Africa's most populous country is teetering on the brink [of becoming a failed state]" (Financial Times, 2020).

Poverty is rife in Nigeria. According to various estimates, 51% of all Nigerians live in extreme poverty, surviving on less than $1.90 a day. The poverty extends beyond monetary value as well; the World Bank estimates there are more people living in multidimensional poverty (lack of access to housing, health, education etc.) in Nigeria than the entire population of the Democratic Republic of Congo. While it is continually in an arms race with South Africa over who has the largest economy in Africa, a staggering amount of Nigeria's population, particularly young people, are in various stages of unemployment (Kazeem, 2020).

Government officials are notoriously corrupt as is the police force. Nigeria ranks 149 out of 180 countries surveyed on Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index and public service users often pay bribes to be attended to.

Security challenges remain largely unsolved. The government is locked in an unending war with the terror group Boko Haram that has claimed untold lives in Nigeria's northeast and displaced thousands more. More than 100 of the 276 Chibok schoolgirls kidnapped by the group in 2014 are still missing. Deadly clashes between nomadic herders and settled farmers, originally confined to Nigeria's Middle Belt region, have now spread to other parts of the country, with religious and ethnic differences underpinning the economic conflict. Armed gunmen, colloquially known as "bandits", continue to wreak havoc in different parts of Nigeria's north, leaving scores dead. Arrests are seldom made in these brutal attacks. And across the country, a controversial unit of the police, the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), carries out a campaign of harassment, torture and extrajudicial killings with reckless abandon. Nationwide protests against the unit's unrestrained power erupted last October, giving voice to young people who had been tormented for years for the sins of owning iPhones and sporting tattoos. In response, the Nigerian government cracked down on largely peaceful protests with violent force, culminating in the killing of at least 12 people at the Lekki tollgate in Lagos on October 20 (Busari et al, 2020).

These factors are why Nigerians in the country are seeking to leave for greener pastures and those already elsewhere have no desire to return home. Canada has emerged as a destination of

choice in recent years. With Canada keen on expanding its labour force and lowering its average population age, it has begun a campaign of openly courting skilled migrants from around the world. Educated and middle-class Nigerians are taking the opportunity, and for five consecutive years, more Nigerians have migrated to Canada than the previous year (Kazeem, 2020).

And despite frosty relations with South Africa, it will also remain a destination of choice for Nigerians seeking to escape their own country. I am an example of this. South Africa was never on my radar as a place to migrate to when I actively began thinking of leaving Nigeria in 2019. Like many others, I was especially keen on moving to the United Kingdom. But when the opportunity to study for a master's degree at the University of the Witwatersrand's Journalism programme through a Konrad Adenauer Foundation scholarship came up, it was simply too good to pass up. I left a relatively comfortable life and cushy job in Lagos to move here to study. Friends and family were delighted for me but also worried about my safety, considering the animosity towards Nigerians and the wave of attacks in 2019, which I briefly covered. But I knew I would almost certainly not be in harm's way; I was going to be in a university environment where safety was all but guaranteed. That has proven to be correct. With the coronavirus lockdowns keeping us indoors anyway, I am safer than ever.

When I made the decision to move to South Africa, I had no immediate plans for what would follow graduate school. But a part of me thought this would be a step on my way to the West, like the mushy middle many Nigerians I spoke to view this country as. With a master's degree in hand and still aged below 30, the sweet spot for the type of immigrant Canada desires, it was clear to me that I could make a play for Toronto like some of my friends in the past few years. But 13 months later, I'm not so sure about moving away from here. For one, I could put my skills as a journalist to better use in Johannesburg, Africa's media capital, than in the West. And having lived in South Africa for about 13 months now, I can unequivocally say that my quality of life has been enhanced by living in this country. For example, electricity, despite irregular cuts here and there, is constant in a way that Nigeria's has not been since I've been alive. Having to plan your life around power cuts is exhausting. The idea of a continued stay in South Africa, even with the occasional pockets of resistance towards immigrants and Nigerians in particular, is now appealing to me. There's also a sense of making up for lost time. Around the same time I arrived in the last week of January 2020, a strange respiratory illness was emerging from China and making its way around the world. Just as I was getting settled

in South Africa, coronavirus-enforced lockdowns cut off all attempts at socialising and immersing myself in this country. And so I find myself in this weird space of having been in this country longer than anywhere else that is not Nigeria but still having not *lived* enough in a manner to form concrete opinions or make friends. How much living can one do when you're largely restricted to a room the size of a postage stamp? Now with the cloud slowly lifting, I'm keen on experiencing South Africa and seeing beyond Johannesburg.

South Africans often complain about this country, and for good reason on many occasions, but with the benefit of an outsider's perspective, I can tell you that this country is far better than Nigeria has been in at least the last 20 years. But perhaps that's an easy bar to clear for any moderately competent nation.

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