CHAPTER 13

Nigerians in Transit: The Trader and the Religious in Jerusalem House, Ghana

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Introduction

Migration of people in Africa is one of its most important demographic features. In West Africa, the cocoa farms in Ghana and Côte d’Ivoire attract large numbers of seasonal labourers, especially from Burkina Faso. Ghanaian fishermen abound in coastal areas of the sub-region; those of other vocations are found in the Sahelian areas of Mali, while some put their skills to use in the mines of Sierra Leone and Liberia. Nigerians, noted for commerce and trade, have been found as far afield as the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Swaziland and have participated in artisanal mining of precious minerals nearby in Ghana (Peil 1974). Over a hundred years ago, a significant feature of labour on Ghana’s Sekondi–Tarkwa–Kumasi railway line was the use of indentured workers. As at May 1902, 7,000 of 16,000 workers were from Lagos, and the Lagos colonial administration charged £1 for each worker recruited (Tsey 2013). The main groups comprised immigrants from Lagos, specifically the Yoruba.

Arising from these migrant workers were two types of feedback related to wealth acquisition. Firstly, they were working on a rail line that led to the place where Ghana’s gold is produced, and perhaps family members who were first-hand receivers of such crucial information might have had access to gold, as descendants would later attest. Secondly, the Lagos colonial administration levy appears to have been the first official attempt at harnessing remittances from Nigerian individuals participating in rail line construction in Ghana. Even in the absence of direct access to gold, it represented an opportunity to earn some income for those who wanted to quit the agricultural sector in the increasingly urbanized Lagos area. Thus, back in Nigeria, for those that received feedback from relatives working on the rail line in Ghana, there arose an attraction to travel. Access to gold became the pull factor; shrinking opportunities for land ownership for farming in Lagos became the push factor. Many of these Yoruba were later to travel to Ghana via another route and eluded the £1 charge by the Lagos colonial administration. They entered Ghana in the northern sector and stayed and helped develop two transit villages—Banda and Chinderi—which are about 27 km apart in the northern part of the Volta, after which
many moved down south to rendezvous with their relatives who were working in the rail line construction sites that led to gold.\textsuperscript{1} On this account, we see that social factors, particularly those related to household and family structures, play a critical role in determining patterns of migration and development.

However, the traditional configurations of Nigerian migrant flows into Ghana, as well as the nature of transit points within Ghana, have changed in recent years (Adepoju 2003). By accident of geographic location of the Yoruba in Lagos, the early sets of economic migrants into Ghana from Nigeria were the Yoruba of southwest Nigeria, where the seat of colonial administration was located. Over a century later, official as well as anecdotal accounts indicate that the Ibo of southeast Nigeria are found in increasing numbers in Ghana, particularly in Accra. Also in search of wealth, the itinerant nature of the Igbo businessman presupposes different processes of settling in Ghana. For instance, when compared with what used to obtain a century ago, the mode of travelling into Ghana has changed, as have the socio-economic setting, urban settlement patterns, and government policies that preclude or encourage immigration.

This study examines transience in the route to prosperity of the latter-day arrivals in Ghana, specifically in Accra. This is done with special reference to Jerusalem House, a compound accommodating 50–100 persons at any given time (according to accounts of the landlord and tenants, respectively) and a notable transit point for Ibo immigrants in the Odorkor area of Accra. The establishment of Jerusalem House, its governance structure, and the social interactions relevant for the Ibo and their neighbours will be assessed. Relevant comparisons will be made to the hub of early Yoruba immigrants in Anagokoji, a suburb of Ho in the Volta Region.

In this study, other configurations of connectivity explored are the notion of family in Jerusalem House and how it plays an important role in the settling process of Ibo migrants. Specific arrangements examined are the ways in which human, social, and financial capital acquisition and investment are negotiated in individual and group bases, and how this has led to new definitions of the family for the migrant. In addition, this study also qualitatively examines how government policies related to the welcome afforded to, and/or the duration of stay of Nigerian migrants have evolved in the past four decades; the incentives and the constraints, and particularly how the current $300,000 business registration policy for foreigner-owned businesses stipulated by the Ghanaian government is being accepted, rejected, and circumvented (in connivance with Ghanaians) by the current crop of Nigerian migrants.

\textsuperscript{1} In-depth interview: Khadija, aged 28, of mixed Nigerian–Ghanaian parenthood, granddaughter of first-generation Nigerian immigrant.