CHAPTER 14

Ghanaian Migrants in the Netherlands: Germany as a Transit Zone

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Preface

As part of my Research Master programme at the University of Groningen, I was required to do an internship; and, fortunately, I had an internship opportunity with the African Studies Centre (ASC) in Leiden. At the ASC I worked with the collaborative research group ‘Roads to Prosperity’. I was required to write a research paper on ‘transit’ migration. As a Ghanaian and with my initial curiosity in the term *burger*—a term used in Ghana in reference to any individual who has travelled outside the country—I decided to conduct research on Ghanaians in the Netherlands who had come via Germany. This is basically because the term *burger* is contested. It is often argued to be derived from the German city Hamburg, but it means ‘migrant’ in general, regardless of whether the migrant in question actually settles in Hamburg or elsewhere. I wondered whether the term *burger* was indeed a reference to Hamburger, someone who lived in Hamburg, or to the Dutch *burger*, which means citizen, or to the German *burger*, which also meaning citizen—since some Ghanaian migrants have acquired citizenship status in these European states. Hence, this background informed my choice of Germany and the Netherlands to understand both transit migration and Ghanaian migrants in the Netherlands on their roads to socio-economic prosperity.

Introduction

At present, nearly all countries in the world are concurrently countries of origin, destination, and transit for international migrants. The growing complexity of migratory patterns and their influence on development have all contributed to migration becoming a priority for in-depth research. Ghanaian migrants are an example of a migrant group that maintains strong familial ties

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and bonds between host communities and people back in Ghana (Akyeampong 2000; Van Dijk 2001; Asiedu 2005; Arthur 2008). This paper presents the findings and analysis of a snowball sampling of 12 Ghanaian migrants (burgers) currently based in the Netherlands who came via Germany. For them, Germany was a place of transit.

Some burgers pass through (transit) several countries before reaching their final destination. There are a number of factors involved that cause migrants to go through other countries, such as distance between Ghana and destination countries, attachment to native place, difficulty in acquiring a visa or inability to get residence permits or work permits, travelling cost, maintenance of double establishments, social condemnation, migratory laws, discouragement by recipient countries, language, religion, and customs. An established misconception about migration is that it is usually seen as a simple move from one place to another (Skeldon 1997); however, migration is a very dynamic process.

This study explores the experiences of some burgers in the Netherlands who came through Germany. In particular, this paper answers the question of why migrants stay ‘in transit’ and what their experiences are in transit. Focusing on the interviews conducted, the research will also discover whether the interviewees perceived Germany as a place of transit or Germany became a place of transit over time. Questions such as why some Ghanaians move to Germany, why they continue on to the Netherlands, and what connections they maintain with their home country will be answered.

Concepts and Theories

Many concepts and theories have been used in migration studies. For the purpose of this research, transit migration, transnational migration, and chain migration will be discussed. Much emphasis will be placed on transit migration, as several studies have already explored migration concepts such as transnationalism and chain migration. Broadly speaking, transnationalism refers to multiple ties and interactions linking people or institutions across several nation states, therefore spreading mobility across the globe. New technologies, particularly telecommunications, serve to connect people all over the world, making many people belong to more than one society or country at the same time (Levitt 2004; Levitt & Schiller 2004). Chain migration can be simply defined as that migration pattern where prospective migrants benefit

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2 See Caldwell (1968); Levitt, DeWind & Vertovec (2003); Østergaard-Nielsen (2003); Fong, Cao & Chan (2010).