

5 JAPÁ

'When people make some money or have some opportunity, often they don't want to raise their children in Nigeria. When we reach a certain level of financial independence, most of us want to leave for better pay, better security, better standards of living. Most people are not looking to become millionaires – they just want a greater degree of certainty and security about the future, better healthcare, things like that.'
John, 34

'I am trying to emigrate to Australia. I went to university, I'm trained as an engineer, but I'm working as a waiter because there are no jobs. I'm married now and it is hard to raise a family on what I'm earning. In Australia they are looking for people with my qualifications and they have jobs for us. It's a long way away but I would like to go. At least for a few years.'
Abiodun, 28

'I want to go to Canada. As long as you have a degree, a skill that is well needed, like software developers, you can go. I want to live somewhere else, and just come back to visit.'
Uzor, 28

'Young Nigerians are living in terror and a lot of activists are leaving the country. It's not safe, people like DJ Switch, who is at the height of her career, are leaving. Many of the brightest minds are leaving.' Rinu, 23

'It feels like every week one of my acquaintances is moving to another country. My friends think I'm crazy because I still work for a Nigerian employer. The currency is shit and I have

the skills to work for other people who would pay me in dollars or pounds. With a bit of effort, I can leave this country if I wanted to. My ultimate dream in life is to have land in New Zealand, a small sustainable house in the middle of a forest, and just come back when I miss my family.' S. I., 25

'Many of those who have the opportunity to leave the country are going but I've never been one to believe in leaving. I'm in my fatherland and I feel like a king here. I love my country so much; I knew that no matter what, I was going to make it here, because there are a lot of opportunities in Nigeria.' Osinachi, 30

Lagos offers many opportunities but life in a megacity is exhausting. For the very poor, it is a daily struggle to survive. Even for those with a measure of economic security, the failure of infrastructure, the long commutes, the constant hustle for success can wear thin. *Japá* is a Yoruba word that translates as 'run away'. The word has become part of this generation's lexicon, defining the desire of many young Nigerians to make, or at least experience, a new life abroad. Research suggests as many as 57 per cent would consider leaving the country to work or study abroad if it were possible, though less than 10 per cent are making actual preparations, such as getting a visa.¹

Journalist S. I. Ohumu, 25, is one who is toying with the idea. 'I want to not live here for a bit. Nigeria is tedious right now. I don't know how it feels to have stable electricity – I know at any point in time my power is going to get cut. I don't know what it feels like for the state to provide water for me. I have to dig boreholes and fuck up my water table. I don't know what it feels like to have something like the NHS. If I get sick, I'm one health emergency away from bankruptcy', she says.

According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the majority of African emigrants look within the continent for opportunities: in 2019, over 21 million were living in another African country.² Intra-Africa migration is not always easy. South Africa remains the preferred destination, with around four million migrants living in the country.³ But domestic political, economic and social crises in South Africa have led to the scapegoating of migrants by public officials, reinforcing existing xenophobic sentiments among the public.⁴

Magnum Muiyiwa is 34. He now lives in Lagos, where he runs a chain of kiosks that offer electronic cash withdrawal, but he spent several years living in South Africa. 'I moved to South Africa and opened a small chain of barber shops there', he says. 'I was making a lot of money, but the South Africans don't like Nigerians. We work hard and we make money, and they think we are taking things away from them. There was a riot and they burned down all the Nigerian businesses. I lost my biggest shop, so I came home.'

Of those who look further afield for opportunities, a 2019 report found that almost 80 per cent are driven by the hope for better economic or social prospects and that most are young, educated and relatively wealthy: able to meet tough visa requirements and to afford the fees and costs of travelling and living abroad.⁵

Ohumu's ambitions are typical. 'I want a Master's in Journalism and I'm not going to study here', she says. 'I'm thinking of Goldsmiths – they have a very interesting digital journalism course – and I like Columbia and McGill in Canada, too. I'm focusing right now on getting scholarships.'

Influencer and entrepreneur John Obidi, 34, moved to Dubai to grow his career. 'I emigrated to the UAE eight months ago', he says. He had a choice of destinations. 'Canada has its doors wide open to talented Nigerians, so

does the US. Countries like that can attract the best and the brightest and Nigeria becomes a farm for talent – Saudi Arabia has more Nigerian doctors than Nigeria has.’

The issue of brain drain is real. Nigeria sends the largest number of African students abroad – some 95,000 – and ranks fifth in the world in terms of the overall number of students in foreign study.⁶ Some 374,000 Nigerians live in the US, making them the largest African migrant group according to the United States Census Bureau.⁷ The *Financial Times* says Nigerians in the US are the most highly educated of all groups in the country, with 61 per cent holding at least a Bachelor’s degree (compared with 31 per cent of the total foreign-born population and 32 per cent of the US-born population).⁸ More than half of Nigerian immigrants were likely to occupy management positions, compared with 32 per cent of the total foreign-born population and 39 per cent of the US-born population.⁹

‘Gifted young Nigerians have other viable options and most of the people who have the ability and drive to change the country emigrate’, says Ohumu. She echoes widely held perceptions that much of the country’s young people are looking to leave. Writing in *The Republic*, John Babalola, a public policy analyst in Lagos, says: ‘For a lot of Nigerians, relocating abroad with little or no intent to return has become a life goal. For some, the Nigerian project requires abandonment.’¹⁰ But, both within Africa and in the Global North, the number of African and Nigerian immigrants is vastly overestimated.

The share of Africans living abroad has barely increased since the 1960s.¹¹ According to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), in 2017, of the 258 million international migrants worldwide, only 36 million were African, around 14 per cent of the total and equal to just under 3 per cent of Africa’s population.¹² In 2019, according to the IOM, more than 40 per cent of all international migrants were

born in Asia, primarily originating from India, China, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan.¹³ Mexico was the second largest country of origin, and the Russian Federation was fourth. Several European countries have sizable populations of emigrants, including Ukraine, Poland, the United Kingdom and Germany.¹⁴ Of the top 20 countries of emigrants, not one was from mainland sub-Saharan Africa.¹⁵

DESA estimated Nigeria's diaspora at 1.7 million in June 2020,¹⁶ less than 1 per cent of the country's population. But perhaps because it is the most talented that usually make their way abroad, this 1 per cent is a powerful and important interest group. Diaspora Nigerians continue to have a significant impact on their home nation, not least financially. For four consecutive years, official remittances from diaspora Nigerians have exceeded the country's oil revenues.¹⁷ According to the Nigeria White Paper by consulting group PWC, the diaspora accounted for US\$23.63 billion in remittances in 2018: an amount that is equal to 6.1 per cent of Nigeria's GDP and 80 per cent of the

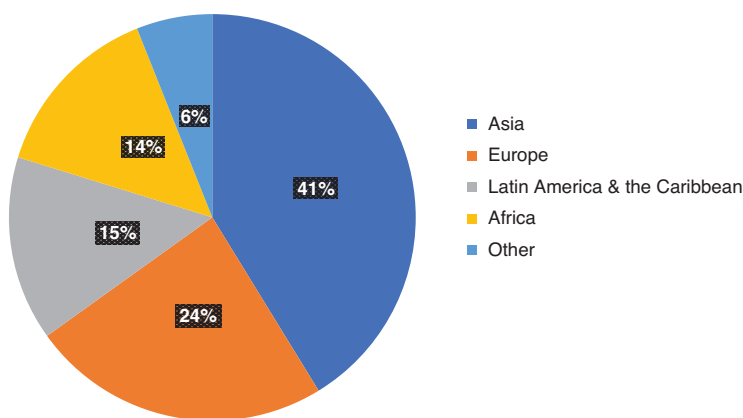


Figure 22 Percentage of total global migrants by their continent of origin
Source: www.un.org/development/desa/pd/content/international-migrant-stock

country's budget.¹⁸ This amount is also 11 times the foreign direct investment flow into the country during the same period.

Young diaspora Nigerians also have a softer, though no less important, role to play as cultural ambassadors. Successful Nigerian musician Davido has had over a billion streams of his music online. Speaking to Trevor Noah on *The Daily Show*, he credited the Nigerian diaspora for its role in his success: 'With my music, it started from Atlanta, from Nigerians being in the club and telling the DJ, "I'm going to spend money today but play Davido's music when my bottles are coming out." Or females asking the DJ "play his song, play his song". In 2013, I sold out every venue, 20 shows across the US, without exposure so I have to give a shout out to the diaspora people that supported us.'¹⁹

Recognising the importance of the diaspora, the Nigerian federal government established the Nigerians in Diaspora Commission in 2017, to maximise the human, capital and material resources of this demographic and to try to engage diasporic Nigerians in national policies and projects. And many diaspora Nigerians remain heavily invested in Nigeria, emotionally and financially.

Oyindamola Shoola, 24, is studying in the US but also runs an online organisation promoting, supporting and developing young writers within Nigeria. 'When people ask, I say I'm Nigerian. I come from Nigeria. No matter how much I associate myself with another identity – I got American citizenship this year – my Nigerian-ness will always come through. It comes through in my accent, my name, my sarcasm. The perspective of things as a Nigerian is also different, and that Nigerian spirit is just inside me', she says. 'Home is different from here. There is a community, it allows you to have peace of mind, it's more relaxing, less demanding, more peaceful and there is more support. At the moment, I'm being exposed to different cultures and different things and it's hard for me to say I want to go to one place and settle

there. But I want to go back when I know that my presence is meaningful, and I can do something tangible.'

Shoola highlights another aspect of migration that is often disregarded: a growing number of young African immigrants are choosing to leave the West and return home. In a project for *The African Perspective Magazine* and Deutsche Welle, film-maker Ras Mutabaruka created a series called *Homecoming in 2020*, which documented the return of eight young African women.²⁰ These included Navalayo Osembo, who resigned from her United Nations job in New York to move back to Kenya and start Enda, Africa's first running shoe company; and Nathalie Munyampenda, who gave up a job with the Canadian government and moved back to Rwanda to work with the Next Einstein Forum at the African Institute for Mathematical Sciences.

'In all of my time living and working in the West, I have yet to meet a young African professional who doesn't dream of one day moving back to the continent', writes Mutabaruka for Deutsche Welle.²¹ 'Besides systemic barriers that prevent many from fully realizing their potential abroad, this generation doesn't just want to work for a pay check. They want to know that what they are doing is valuable and has a real impact on real people. They want to be a part of the continent's rebirth.'

Nigerian tech entrepreneur Iyinoluwa Aboyeji, 31, illustrates Mutabaruka's point. The growing opportunities that Lagos offers helped lure him back from the US and he has now launched Future Africa, an early-stage venture fund that connects African investors with local start-ups. 'We work very closely with local companies', he says. 'Without early-stage capital that gets someone past their first year, a lot of young entrepreneurs can't get off the ground. We connect them with local investors who have an affinity to the problems on the ground and make sure that we get them that early-stage money.'

But a sense of identity and belonging also played a part in his decision to return home. ‘I feel more powerful in Africa than I do in the US or any other part of the world’, he says. ‘I don’t have to contest my humanity here. I am a very different person in the US, where I have to contend, where I have to ask: Am I real?’

Immigration can offer young people a real opportunity, to learn new skills and make new connections. The true challenge lies not in preventing japá but in encouraging young people to utilise their period spent abroad to enrich themselves with skills and knowledge and, then, in building a country that is secure and with sufficient opportunity to attract them home again.

‘We need a Nigeria where a common graduate can get a job that pays enough to save and to live’, says 23-year-old Rinu Oduala. ‘Where law enforcement doesn’t abuse the rights of citizens. We need peace, dignity and justice so that young people can really breathe and where Nigerians living abroad can come home and feel safe.’