

Global African Entrepreneurs: A New Research Perspective On Contemporary African Migration

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Passengers are waiting for their late-night flights out of Guangzhou. A noticeable number of African women and men, some dressed in colorfully patterned clothes typical for West African countries, others wearing plain European style; some sitting and relaxing, others queuing up in front of the check-in counters of Emirates Airlines, Kenya Airways, Ethiopian Air. There are remarkably few European passengers. Africans seem to make up a large part of the airport's customers.

International migrants from sub-Saharan Africa are targeting in increasingly larger numbers destinations in South and East Asia, the Gulf countries, the Middle East, South America, or the distant large urban centers in the African continent itself. This is a recent development, and there is some pioneering research that takes note of it, but it has not yet received the attention it deserves. The very idea goes against the grain of many presuppositions about international African migration, in the popular media as well as in scholarly circles, not all of which are reasoned or even acknowledged. The phenomenon is often discussed under the heading of South-South migration. It is clear, however, that much more than just the points of the compass need to be brought to consideration. The term "South-South" is also problematic, starting with the question of what constitutes the South, and then the assumption that the disparate countries brought under this label have much in common and as much to distinguish them from the North (Bakewell 2009). Putting aside for the moment these reservations, African migrations to places other than "the North" is the topic that the articles presented in this special issue of *URBAN ANTHROPOLOGY* addresses.

So far, public and scholarly engagement has focused on Western perceptions of African migrants as political or economic refugees. Concurrently, the debates have centered on issues of integration, exclusion, xenophobia, brain drain, transnationalism, remittances, etc. In this special issue, we would like to get away from the perspective of African migrants as "victims" and the idea of a unidirectional impetus (people going abroad, money flowing back). We would rather stress the self-directed nature of migration, migrants' entrepreneurial aspiration and orientation, and sometimes the success of these enterprises. Hence, from a certain perspective what matters is not whether people left as students, businesspeople, workers, maids, or refugees, but what they actually do or try to achieve during their stay abroad. This includes also the transfer of funds

from Africa to other countries, at the very least the initial savings, but in some cases much more significant sums transferred as business capital. That is, migration often involves the desire to seek one's fortune abroad with the intention of coming back to the home country after having achieved success and in possession of means to continue at a much larger scale than was possible before; an objective that may or may not be reached but explains much that is distinctive about recent African migrations. Our geographic focus on South-South/East is not based on the assumption that African migration to the North is so much different, but rather that the new destinations in the South/East seem to resonate well with entrepreneurial aspirations; also because their moral-legal frameworks are different from the E.U. and U.S.

We believe that this thematic/regional focus is original and needed in the current state of African migration studies, which seem stuck in the themes of political refugees and escape from misery, and often approach the matter as a moral issue of helping the poor. The different case studies assembled in this volume shed new light on the global range of African migration as well as its different perceptions.

Global Migration History: Placing African Migrations in Context

Before the twentieth century, international migration meant mostly some Europeans leaving their densely settled continent, which was in the throes of change, to transfer to one of the more sparsely inhabited parts of the world that was politically controlled by some European power, generally in the western hemisphere or in the southern seas. They became, depending on the location and on the age, farmer settlers, plantation owners, missionaries, or officials in colonial administrations. This

movement came to a halt in the 1920s, and a period of about 40 years with relatively little international migration followed (Massey 1999). A noteworthy novelty of this lessened migration interval was the category of “refugee,” an outcome initially of the massive displacements caused by wars and the redrawing of European political borders according to the logic of recent ethno-nationalisms, to which were then added new dynamics rooted in the rivalries of the Cold War (Long 2013).

International migration numbers went up dramatically once again in the 1960s, but this time the trend was reversed. It was now “people of the South” who migrated to Western Europe, and to the U.S. after the landmark 1965 Immigration Act lifted restrictions that had been in force for several decades and opened the doors to emigration once more. In Europe this new emigration followed the linkages established between metropole and former colonial dependencies that had just gained independence. South Asians and Caribbeans went to England; North and West Africans to France. Germany, which had no colonial connections, went for another arrangement that drew workers through bilateral agreements from less industrialized places in southern Europe, the Balkans, and Turkey. An extended economic growth cycle and labor shortages motivated these policies. In Europe international migration was understood to be for factory work, administered by the state, temporary, and reversible. By the 1980s all of this was disrupted. In Western Europe, migration proved unmanageable, nonreversible, and indeed unstoppable, with rising numbers of foreign nationals arriving from an ever-growing list of home countries, and ceased to be primarily a response to the need for subordinate wage labor.

Today not only are host countries and sending countries much larger in number, the same countries both send and receive migrants. Furthermore, international migration has become a multidirectional phenomenon. Nonetheless, the part of sub-Saharan Africa in all this tends to be greatly exaggerated

in popular perception. Migration is not primarily oriented from the South to the North, especially if South American migration to the United States, which is a particular regional pattern, is set aside. In the larger world scheme of things, African migration to developed countries is marginal and most African international migration takes place within the continent (Adepoju 2004; Bakewell and de Haas 2007; Gnisci and Trémolières 2006: 3). Currently, the idiom of the “refugee” or “asylum seeker” saturates media representations of migration from the global South, and there is also a massive amount of policy and research writing about it. While it operates as a mode of legitimizing migration to Western Europe and North America, it also contributes to blurring our understanding of what most Africans want to achieve when they migrate.

As the contributions to this volume show, today many African migrations are embedded in business and educational networks that span the globe in multiple and varied directions. The same travelers we meet at Baiyun International Airport in Guangzhou, we may encounter at another occasion in Dubai, Istanbul, or Zanzibar. Also, most of them are far from being displaced or destitute people; rather, they are purposeful individuals, often of a middle-class background, who aspire to a professional or business career. In this sense, the protagonists of our contributions are no different from the majority of today’s international migrants, most of whom are motivated by the incentive of improving their lives.

Theorizing Migration Choices

For many years, the “pull” and “push” concepts provided analysts with a framework to study the causes and motivations of international migration. They provided a heuristic device that allowed the listing and discussion of factors promoting

migration. This framework worked best when focusing on alternating but discordant economic growth and contraction periods in different parts of the world to explain the direction and the variable rates of migration in historical time (Massey et al. 1998: 13). These days it has become *de rigueur* to start any theoretical discussion of migration with a critique of the pull-push framework. According to de Haas (2008), historical structural approaches challenged theorists' assumption that individuals have free choice in making migration decisions. They present them in more deterministic terms as pressured into movement by broad structural processes. A criticism of the push and pull framework from a geographer's perspective is presented by Malmberg (1997), who points out that the causes adduced were always narrowly economic.

We note, however, that the economic models vulnerable to these critiques are the macro-economic ones that focus on aggregate national trends. The neoclassical models, which build upon the assumption of actors making deliberate choices, and which allow for different norms to guide these decisions as well as a host of specifications of constraints, need to be addressed separately. Indeed, when the focus is on the neoclassical decision maker, push and pull can no longer be neatly separated. For example, if a person is assumed to be unhappy with her or his current position or income and undertakes a costly and painful relocation in the belief that it is possible to improve them, what would allow us to classify the analytic elements of this decision as push or pull? In this respect, neoclassical models have an affinity with modes of explanation that privilege the agency of persons.

Most contributions to this volume feature African migrants whose decisions have been inspired by economic calculations and a decisive business spirit, and who may be seen as examples of neoclassical actors. While for some, engagement in trade or related entrepreneurial activities has been part of their social background, others come from a different professional

or class context, and have turned to business as a more promising alternative. For all of them, the act of becoming a street vendor, opening a restaurant, or running an export company has been a deliberate choice. It has been linked to financial investments, at times of considerable extent, and the hope to gain both economic security and social status.

The neoclassical models have been criticized for neglecting the social and political realities that structure migrants' actions, as well as the factors that might lead to the alteration of these realities. Observations such as the importance of networks; the self-perpetuating nature of migration loops once they get started (pointed out by Castles and Miller 2009); and the restructuring of physical, demographic, or sociopolitical conditions as initial causes of migration and also as its possible consequence are difficult to take into account.

As several of the contributions indicate, the political, legal, and social contexts in which migrants have to navigate, both in their home countries and in their place of stay, are highly relevant in shaping their choices. Migrant decisions and their outcomes are contingent on the interplay of structural and individual factors, such as changing immigration regulations, economic reforms, or a new stage in family planning. As we learn from the case studies explored in the different papers, the variety in success (or failure) stories is so significant that there is no silver bullet, and everyone is succeeding (or failing) in her or his own way.

Massey et al. (1998) present another set of criticisms of neoclassical models under the heading "New Economics of Labour Migration" (NELM). This new orientation in economics builds on the insight that migration decisions are not made by individuals, but by larger units of related people, be they families, households, or communities. Furthermore, it posits that the decision for labor migration may be motivated by both maximizing income and minimizing risk, so as to make up for various sorts of adversities other than labor market problems.

Another significant insight is that poverty should be conceived not in absolute terms but as relative and subjectively felt deprivation, which means that the poorest need not be the ones feeling the greatest urge to move. Moreover, advances in socio-cultural anthropology take the household no longer as a unit ruled by a benevolent dictator nor as a collective agency that can be assimilated to one decision-making actor (Thorsen 2009: 302). On the contrary it is a bundle of wills with shared and opposed interests, from which issue cooperation, negotiation, and rivalry. This complicates further the interplay of income and other sociopolitical factors in conceptualizing migration decisions.

In this renewed climate of research, the articles presented in this special issue of *URBAN ANTHROPOLOGY* will meet with favor and have important observations and interpretations to contribute. They offer detailed examinations of sub-Saharan African migrants to places other than Western Europe or North America with close attention to the context of departure decisions and the realities in the places of reception. They take seriously the aims and aspirations of entrepreneurial migrants, which have been discovered in face-to-face contact with research subjects and in the participation to varying degrees in their lives and activities.

The Correlation of Economic Development and Migration

In his contribution to this issue, Şaul especially stresses the connection between African international migration and the recent economic growth rates in Africa. As he argues, higher incomes make more resources available and thus awaken hitherto dormant aspirations. His argument is endorsed by existing studies that indicate that economic development and higher wages seem to trigger rather than constrain emigration;

a finding that applies to both developing and developed countries (Castles 2008; de Haas 2007; Kurekova 2011; Malmberg 1997). Other studies indicate that it is not the poorest countries that send the most international migrants (Faist 2000; de Haas 2008; Massey et al. 1998), and also, within countries, it is not the poorest individuals who migrate (Gnisci and Trémolières 2006: 8). This insight controverts the widespread assumption that a linear relationship exists between low national income and migration rates. Many studies in the social sciences and the humanities take this presumed linearity almost for granted, and under the influence of this supposition, ambitious “co-development” schemes have been launched in Europe to stem unwanted immigration, with limited success.

On the basis of statistical methods, economists have arrived at similar conclusions using either cross-sectional or time-series comparisons (Hatton and Williamson 2003). In a study based on a panel of 127 countries and specifically designed to check for causality and not mere register correlation, Letouzé et al. (2009) confirm that most countries experiencing a rise in living standards also develop higher emigration rates. The economic literature postulates an “inverted U” relationship between economic development and migration, migration rates going up as income rises up to a certain point, then leveling (“the hump”), and then slightly falling as income rises further.

The reasons why migration rates rise with growing incomes may be multiple and mutually reinforcing. A higher level of wealth brings the monetary resources needed for departure within the reach of many more people. Development also brings about institutional and social changes, making more people prone to migration or giving them the desire to do so. Furthermore, it engenders institutional linkages, connections to other parts of the world, and networks that lower the costs of migration and enable a broader fragment of the population to move (Massey et al. 1998).

This is reflected in the recent rise in export trade activity, as described in several of the contributions to this volume. While this is an outcome of greater consumer demand in African cities, it also results in new transnational networks that facilitate further migration. Moreover, it consolidates diplomatic and educational ties that contribute to transnational networks. Growing consumer demand in African cities as a stimulus for the China trade is also the backdrop in the contributions of Morais and Bredeloup, who analyze the role of university students as the agents of this trade.

Interconnections of Entrepreneurial and Educational Migration

Among sub-Saharan Africans who live in Europe or North America there are a large number of university students pursuing college or graduate degrees. This has been the case since the 1960s, including in Eastern European countries, which accorded large contingents of African students scholarships for studying mostly engineering or diverse technical subjects. In the Soviet Union and other eastern bloc countries, African communities originally consisted of students. As these scholarships evaporated since 1990 the number of students going to Western Europe and North America increased exponentially, and now Egypt and North Africa, China, Turkey, and the Gulf countries have also become home to large numbers of students. The topic is often discussed under the headings of skilled labor migration and brain drain, because very few of the students who pursue degrees in high-income countries return to their countries of origin (Abdellatif 2010). While every single one of our contributors in this issue includes a discussion of African students as migrants, especially the articles by Bredeloup, Morais, and Bondarenko, Demintseva, Usacheva,

and Zelenova are completely centered on students' or former students' activities.

For economists, the educational level of the migrants is a matter of human capital. Chiswick (1979) pointed out that the advantages of advanced degrees and technical expertise acquired at home may not transfer well abroad. Qualified and highly educated prospective migrants with job experience may even be "negatively selected," that is disfavored in their search for lucrative transnational jobs (Massey et al. 1998: 456). Many of these ideas, however, are premised on the classical idea of education as a period when a young person gains personal qualifications while remaining exclusively a consumer. The education is valued for what it produces later, a more qualified individual with increased productivity, who adds to the resources of the society and possesses potential for higher incomes.

Our contributions provide evidence for a completely different scenario. Many university students who go abroad approach their scholastic period as part of an already unfolding career, as a source of income in its own right, as well as a way of obtaining a visa and therefore legal residence in a country where this is problematic for their co-nationals. Legal residence also provides leeway (albeit not always full legality) for further entrepreneurial activities (see also Haugen 2013).

Because of the vast income disparities between countries, a scholarship that would be considered modest in a higher-income country can represent an attractive alternative to employment available at home. In choosing to study abroad, a network effect operates that can be observed, for example, with regard to Germany, Turkey, or China. The first African students, who had benefited from international scholarships, were soon followed by other students, often younger siblings, relatives, or friends from a more affluent background, to pursue degrees in the same institutions or countries, with their families shouldering tuition and expenses. To alleviate this financial burden,

many African students engage in income-generating activities on the side. Most often, however, these activities have little to do with the specialization of their degree program. Those who stay as migrants after finishing their degree also generally do not pursue careers for which their specialized education prepared them. However, there may be unforeseen connections, such as in the case of a businessman who imported computers from China to West Africa and found his Chinese engineering education an invaluable advantage for quality control and success in the business (Lyons, Brown, and Li 2013: 87).

At present, the vast literature on brain drain arrives at contradictory or ambiguous conclusions about its impact on economic development; although at critical junctures in some countries' trajectory of development, it can produce a bottleneck (Fischer, Martin, and Straubhaar 1997). The transfer of resources that the migration of professionals represents, is justifiably a matter of concern (Fadoyami 2010). Nevertheless, for many student- or former student-migrants, advanced education represents a bundle of diffuse opportunities rather than a specialized qualification. University student status is key to legal residence and a possible source of scholarship income. Moreover, it is a pathway to learning the language of the new place and its social and economic habitus, a way of escaping the stigma that foreigners may carry, a means for numerous contacts with the nationals of the destination country, the beginning of insertion in alumni and community networks, and a way of meeting a high-status foreign wife. At the same time, advanced education may also serve as cultural capital in the broader sense. That is, as a nontangible resource on which she or he can draw for further flexibility and versatility, and for a general disposition to learn. This view is also shared by most of the African migrants whose experiences are at the heart of the contributions to this volume.

Ethnic Entrepreneurship and Immigration Regulation

Ethnic entrepreneurship is a concept that has been developed in sociological migration theory, mostly in relation to the United States, where foreign-born owners and operators have been overrepresented in small businesses since the late nineteenth century (Waldinger et al. 1990, Volery 2007). The qualifier “ethnic” indicates “a set of connections and regular patterns of interaction among people sharing common national background or migration experiences” (Aldrich and Waldinger 1990: 112). We generally speak of ethnic business when an entrepreneur attends to the specific needs of fellow co-ethnics or co-nationals, such as in the case of ethnic food stores or restaurants. One approach sees entrepreneurship primarily as an alternative to unemployment (rather than a sign of success). Another one attributes people’s engagement in entrepreneurship to their cultural inclinations and the availability of ethnic networks to be exploited. A third one highlights the need for ethnic business to appeal to a large enough or growing community so as to be able to survive and expand.

The most conspicuous example of ethnic business in the context of this volume is the so-called cargo business, addressed in nearly all contributions in one way or another. Cargo or freight companies provide a wide range of services to their mostly African customers, including warehousing and organizing the transport of merchandise to the traders’ home countries, as well as visa facilitation, business assistance, arrangement of accommodation, and money transfer. While Keshodkhar’s contribution is the only one in this volume that can look back on a long history of trade relations spanning Zanzibar and the Arab Gulf, Pelican deals with the rather recent case of Cameroonian traders and migrants in Dubai. As her and other contributions show, the cargo business has become an easy entry-point into business for many African migrants who have established themselves in the commercial hubs of

China, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates. Yet, contrary to the above thesis that ethnic entrepreneurship is just a welcome alternative to unemployment, it becomes evident that for many African migrants the cargo business is more lucrative and attractive than formal employment. Here, the legal frameworks come to play a crucial role, as already theorized by earlier studies on ethnic entrepreneurship (Aldrich and Waldinger 1990). Moreover, the findings of the contributions suggest that some of the novel destinations are more accommodative of African migrants' entrepreneurial aspirations, such as seems the case for Turkey and Dubai, than the classical migration destinations in the North. Also, alongside economic and educational opportunities, immigration policies continue to play a crucial role in shaping the migration trajectories of African global entrepreneurs.

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