

# A Reappraisal of the Expulsion of Illegal Immigrants from Nigeria in 1983

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# A Reappraisal of the Expulsion of Illegal Immigrants from Nigeria in 1983

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In recent years, Nigeria has been quietly expelling more and more immigrants from Niger, Mali, Chad and Cameroon. These foreigners – migrant workers or small traders – face the reinforcement of migration control and the blind fight of the government against Boko Haram. Despite its political instability, Nigeria remains a major immigration destination in West Africa. In this article, I analyze the “undocumented” expulsion of aliens in 1983, officially three million people. I argue that the expulsion was due to the economic crisis but also to a nationalist revenge against Ghana and a political calculation of President Shagari. This implies the exclusion of foreigners from the national labour market and the weakening of the supposed electoral base of his opponents.

*In memory of Dennis D. Cordell and Diouma Gary-Toukara*

By virtue of its exceptional historical and political trajectory, Nigeria symbolises multidimensional violence also extending to other African societies. Since 1953 and the Kano riots against citizens from the Eastern Region (Albert 1993), the country has seemed to evolve in a cycle of violence. The media analysis of its political outcomes remains blurred by an interpretation that lays emphasis on mobilisations that are regionalist, religious or ethnic in nature. The North/South, Muslims/Christians, Yoruba/Ibo/Hausa antagonisms overshadow other forms of socio-political exclusion that obstruct the reappraisal of internal conflicts in Nigeria (Falola 1998; Fourchard 2007; Higazi 2007). This was the issue with the expulsion of two and half million illegal immigrants, citizens of Chad, Cameroon and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS, or the Community) in 1983. This represents almost 3 percent of the country's population (Russell and Teitelbaum 1992, 20). Yet, one of the objectives of ECOWAS, created in Lagos five years after the end of the Biafra civil war (1967–1970), was to prevent conflicts and to contribute to the coming together of different peoples for regional integration. In this scheme and through various protocols, member states

agreed to liberalise the movement of people and goods as a means of transcending the divisions inherited from colonial administration. Faced with scale of protests from neighbouring countries, President Shagari pointed to unfavourable economic conditions and popular demands:

Many such illegal immigrants were tolerated by Nigeria for humanitarian reasons, but it soon became clear that the activities of many of these immigrants ran counter to the national interest of Nigeria. Besides, the fact that many of them were taking up cheap menial jobs, to the detriment of many Nigerians, and also engaging in criminal and anti-social activities detrimental to the interest of the nation. Many were also engaged in smuggling Nigerian food and other goods to their home countries. It was soon discovered that most of the workers in our factories were illegal aliens. The trend was extended into many professions including teaching, to such an extent that within a short period, even the roadside mechanics, tailors and domestics servants were largely illegal aliens. There was public outcry about this alarming development and the government had to do something at once to control the situation (Shagari 2001, 330).

To what extent are these affirmations tenable? How could one explain that, in one section of public opinion, the purpose of the order to expel illegal immigrants seemed to be to hunt for all the foreigners living in the country, especially Ghanaians? Many works have explored this event and

pointed out, rightly, the importance of the deterioration of economic conditions in the president's decision (Philippe 1983; Gravil 1985; Falola and Ihonvbere 1985; Afolayan 1988). This article revisits the expulsion of foreigners from Nigeria in 1983, examining its hitherto poorly documented nationalist, symbolic and identity dimensions. After the spectacular expulsion of its nationals from Ghana in 1969, Nigeria retaliated by repatriating Ghanaians in return. It is often overlooked that this event falls within the continuum of a rivalry between the two countries dating from the colonial period. Because their country was modernised earlier socio-economically, the Ghanaian elites acquired a sense of superiority with regard to their Nigerian counterparts.<sup>1</sup> After independence, this feeling was fuelled by strong competition on the African diplomatic scene, with Ghana the first independent sub-Saharan country proclaiming itself the representative of the continent on foreign affairs and reducing its Nigerian rival to an idol with feet of clay. To worsen the matter, during the Biafran war that threatened the very existence of Nigeria, not only did Ghana accord early recognition to the secession, but also did not hesitate to expel 140,000 Nigerians within that same period (Aluko 1976, 227, 240). Under these conditions, I argue that the 1983 expulsion proceeds not only from economic crisis but also contains elements of nationalist vengeance and a transposition of the rivalry between the president and his opponents from the political arena to the social sphere. By nationalist vengeance, I mean a symbolic triple revenge of Nigeria on Ghana: teach the good pupil of the former British West African a lesson, sanction her in retaliation for the 1969 expulsion, and affirm the authority of a state whose interest in the rest of Africa was being challenged. Furthermore, at the internal level, the confrontation between citizens and foreigners also doubled as an indirect con-

frontation between the president and the opposition because of the rumour that Ghanaian illegal immigrants were supposedly being prepared for presidential elections scheduled that same year: "It was reported that Nigeria's opposition parties were registering Ghanaian residents to vote for them in the forthcoming elections."<sup>2</sup> The historian Louise White (2000) has already shown the effects of rumour on *vox populi* in the colonial East Africa and described the deformed, even fantastic, image of whites that settled there. This analysis could be applied to the Nigerian case, where rumour and suspicion constitute one of the driving forces behind popular mobilisations. Again recently, in April 2013, there was a rumour in Lagos that members of Boko Haram were preparing bombings, aided by migrants from Chad, Niger or Mali (Ojo, Suberu and Murtala 2013). These collectively constituted the third (albeit largely unknown) foreigner community in the country after Ghana and Benin, (Afolayan 2009, 15).<sup>3</sup> With the public expression of xenophobia changing according to period and circumstances, I propose to analyse the expulsion of 1983 with a double comparison: between the Ghanaian and Malian immigrants on one hand, and on the other, the mechanisms of expulsion using the foreigner label in Nigeria and in Côte d'Ivoire.

Adopting a socio-historical approach to the management of migration, this study relies mainly on fieldwork conducted in Nigeria and a critical analysis of post-colonial archives.<sup>4</sup> Reinserted within the context of debates on the use of the label "foreigners" as a resource of political legitimisation (Bayart, Geschiere, and Nyamnjoh 2001; Whittaker 2005), it reveals the differentiated handling of foreign communities living in Nigeria during that time, while taking into consideration their numbers and their socio-economic positions.

1 By reason of an early start in higher education, professional training and the attainment of national independence: "The Gold Coast leaders felt superior to the Nigerians for three main reasons. Firstly, the Gold Coast had the advantage of higher education earlier than Nigeria. Secondly, most of the Nigerians trading and working in Ghana till the early fifties were largely uneducated and unskilled labour, and 'farm hands.' Thirdly, the faster rate of the decolonization process in the Gold Coast, which started with the 1946 constitution, made its leaders feel more important than the Nigerians. The result of all this

was that the Gold Coast did not want to be in any position subordinate to Nigeria" (Aluko 1976, 65).

2 *International Herald Tribune*, 4 February 1983, quoted by Gravil (1985, 528). "It had also been widely believed that some rival parties had distributed voter's cards to 'aliens' and others were organizing alien-gangs to disrupt the elections or cause violence after elections" (Falola and Ihonvbere 1985, 214).

3 Afolayan quoted: Development Research Centre on Migration, 2007, *Global Migrant Origin Database*, Development Research Centre on Migration Globalization and Poverty, March, Version 4.

4 In November 2012, contact with Malians residing in Lagos and Ibadan was made through Lassana Diawara and the Council of Malians of Nigeria (Conseil des Maliens du Nigeria), which is a federative structure with branches in major host countries. This research was done within the framework of ANR research programme XenAfPol, coordinated by Laurent Fourchard and Aurélie Ségatti. I thank Rufus Akinyele, Patrick Oloko, Joseph Ayodokun, Ndubueze O. Nkume-Okorie, and the IFRA team at Ibadan for their help, assistance, and suggestions.

### 1. “Aliens Must Go!” The Nightmare of “Brethren” from ECOWAS and the Legitimacy Crisis of the State

To understand the modalities of the expulsion of 1983, one ought first to explain the conditions that led to the arrival of migrants from ECOWAS, from Chad and from Cameroon during the oil boom of the 1970s, which was marked by annual growth close to 10 percent (Falola and Ihonvbere 1985, 83). Their presence did not receive much attention in public debate, even after the crisis of international overproduction of oil in 1981. This was followed by a fall in price and a rise in urban unemployment, which affected two thirds of urban workers (Falola and Ihonvbere 1985, 98).<sup>5</sup> Close to the presidential election of August 1983, in order to hide the mismanagement of resources from oil operations, President Shagari, campaigning for reelection, tried to acquire a new legitimacy by accusing the illegal immigrants and the opposition. The politicisation of the presence of illegal immigrants reached its peak in 1983.

After the civil war, within a context of growth stimulated by crude oil exportation and a rise in the oil price between 1973 and 1981 (Bach 1989, 220), migratory movement from the rest of West Africa towards Nigerian cities intensified. Through the pull effect, oil revenue financed and revitalised the development of public works and light industry sectors (Philippe 1989, 107–8). Consequently, the local labour market expanded in the area of commercial activities and urban services. This created professional and employment opportunities for migrants coming from the North or from the Sahel, during one or several dry seasons. The great drought that occurred in the Sahel in 1973 intensified the influx. Many of these people lacked identity cards or passports, as President Shagari lamented:

The problem of illegal aliens has been with the Ministry of Internal Affairs from the advent of the “oil boom”, in the early 1970’s, when large number of immigrations from neighbouring West African countries started to enter the country, mostly illegally, in search of jobs. The drought of between 1973 and 1974; also brought in a new wave of refugees and destitutes, moving in

from the Sahelian region of West Africa (Niger, Mali, Chad, Mauritania, and many others), into Nigeria (Shagari 2001, 330).

Thanks to the rise in the oil price in 1973, Nigeria paradoxically escaped the global economic slowdown that followed. But from 1981 it suffered from the subsequent fall in the oil price caused by overproduction. This was the first downturn for a middle class that had been getting accustomed to a favourable environment (Monnoyer and Philippe 1988, 82). The country embarked on an IMF Structural Adjustment Programme in 1983, with budgetary restrictions and unpopular cuts in social spending. Quickly, general discontentment arose. The social consequences of the structural adjustment resulted in a political crisis (Philippe 1983, 119) against the backdrop of corruption scandals affecting members of state institutions (Joseph 1987). Because of its role as an oil producer, Nigeria was soon exposed to a reversal of its situation: Whereas the populace was hoping that oil revenues would be used to improve living conditions and fund a necessary diversification of the economy, instead petrodollars were used to finance an unproductive and clientelist system benefiting the president and his political allies from the National Party of Nigeria (NPN). Cost inflation became the rule in the attribution of public offers and the importation of goods (Falola and Ihonvbere 1985, 107–8). This added to the disarray of excluded businesspersons and their outsourced agents.

Public opinion could not comprehend how the state had missed such a good opportunity to make the country “take off”. On the other hand, poverty and a high cost of living were the daily fate of the ordinary citizen. In May 1981, at the insistence of the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) – comprising 44 professional bodies – a general strike paralysed the whole country, notwithstanding police and judicial repression (ibid., 99 and 159). In the political arena, mobilisations against President Shagari were organised simultaneously, as the opposition united under the coalition of the Progressive Parties Alliance now comprised of

5 According to the Nigerian Labour Congress, 20,000 textile workers were fired between 1979 and 1982, and in October 1982 alone there were 1,000 redundancies in the chemical industry, 2,000 in the

furniture and woodwork sector, 3,000 in the food, drinks and tobacco industry, and 2,000 in the petroleum industry (Falola and Ihonvbere 1985, 150).

the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) of Chief Obafemi Awolowo, the Great Nigerian People's Party (GNPP) of Alhaji Shugaba Darman and the National People's Party (NPP) of Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe (ibid., 75). On the eve of a rather challenging electoral period, the president had lost all legitimacy and his chances of being re-elected were compromised by growing social inequalities and a determined opposition. What followed was a deleterious election where the government used all available resources (financial, judicial, media) to disqualify the leaders of the Progressive Parties Alliance.

The decision to collectively expel an estimated three million illegal aliens occurred within this chaotic pre-electoral context. On 17 January 1983, President Shagari announced that all foreigners residing illegally in the country were being asked to either leave or get administratively regularised within two weeks, extended to a month for the more qualified like secretaries and nurses (Afolayan 1988, 20). By expelling foreigners, the objective was to reduce unemployment among Nigerian citizens and to stifle a major source of smuggling and criminality. The targeted foreigners were those engaged in informal professional activities without working permits and unlicensed traders. These groups were in fact engaged in unfair competition with unemployed Nigerians (Afolayan 1988, 18). Beggars

and prostitutes were in a different category of foreigners. It is common knowledge that in countries experiencing immigration and having difficulties dealing with crisis and unemployment, some political leaders try to scapegoat foreigners and tighten conditions of residence. This is a means of acquiring legitimacy, as observed in Côte d'Ivoire (Marshall-Fratani 2006). Nigeria is no exception. According to the president, foreigners had abused the hospitality of Nigerians, and were urged to go back to their countries (Shagari 2001, 333).

The government relied on its own legislation and that of the new Community. The people targeted by the expulsion order had violated the provisions on residence under the 1963 law and under the terms of the Community, which require individuals to regularise their administrative situation when their stay in a member state extends beyond three months (Afolayan 1988, 18). In reality, the government contributed to transforming the expulsion operation into a disorganised and chaotic enterprise. All foreigners, including those that were already regularised, were asked to visit the immigration service at their place of residence. In a press release, the Ogun state immigration office asked for three passport photographs, a copy of the residence permit, and an attestation from the employer.

#### **A press release in Ogun state about the order of registration of the citizens of ECOWAS, Cameroon and Chad<sup>6</sup>**

The Immigration Department in Ogun State has appealed to aliens from ECOWAS countries, Republics of Chad and Cameroon living in the state legally to show up and register.

A statement by the department in Abeokuta announced that registration had commenced throughout the state, and that registration centres were at the state headquarters of Immigration Department at 58B Oko-Ilewo, in Abeokuta and other immigration control posts in the state.

Among other registration centres, according to the announcement, were Idi-Iroko, Ifon-yintedo, Ijoffin and Imeko towns.

All aliens who entered and lived in Nigeria prior to the coming into force of the immigration Act of 1963 and all aliens holding

valid residence permits were required to register, the statement said.

The applicants are expected to bring along three passport size photographs, original copy of residence permit and a letter of introduction from their employer, in respect of those who are employees in private or public sectors.

The statement emphasised that aliens affected and who were employed in the public sector, would only be registered after having their stay in Nigeria regularised.

It called the employers of aliens to apply for regularisation on behalf of their employees, and announced that the registration exercise would be a continuous one.

<sup>6</sup> "Register Now, Aliens Urged", *Daily Times*, February 16, 1983.

In the public perception, this directive contributed to creating confusion between legal and illegal foreigners, including the refugees whereas the central government was targeting the undocumented. Amidst growing confusion, the government felt compelled to specify that Ghanaian and Chadian political refugees were exempted from the order of expulsion.<sup>7</sup> Besides, the government seemed not to have considered the technical and organisational means required for gathering, feeding and transporting an estimated three million deportees. It had Ghanaians conveyed on regular flights of Karbo Airlines, Inter-Continental Airlines, Ghana Airways, Swissair, KLM, Air India and Nigeria Airlines. Nevertheless, that was not enough: “hundreds of illegal aliens [were] stranded at the transit camp and the departure hall of the airport”.<sup>8</sup> In 1970, Côte d’Ivoire had also expelled poor and handicapped migrants on special flights (Gary-Toukara 2008, 243). According to the president, the government released one million dollars to assist the home countries of the repatriated (Shagari 2001, 331), but it is most likely that this money never reached the victims. The government was overwhelmed by events running out of its control (ibid.).

Repatriations were constant, creating a lasting trauma among Ghanaians. They tried to take as many of their belongings as they could gather. The Ghanaians were an epitome of humiliation and violence against foreigners. One can observe three types of violence in this unequal confrontation between individuals and state apparatus. Firstly, there was the disarray of long-settled migrants who were suddenly forced to pack their belongings, without an option of judicial appeal. Many, incredulous at first, ended up pleading, in vain, for an extension of the three-month deadline.<sup>9</sup> Some who had ongoing activities and contracts, were afraid of losing everything. O. Stephen, a tailor from Ghana, complained: “I have paid a year’s rent in advance to my landlord in Ibadan. Because of the agreement entered into, I cannot get it back from him again.”<sup>10</sup> Stephen was also under pressure from his clients,

because “since the Federal government’s order a few days [earlier], a number of customers have besieged his shop forcibly demanding their clothes.”<sup>11</sup> Another form of violence lies in the modalities of waiting and evacuation at the makeshift camps set up at airports, for the luckiest, the borders with Benin or the Apapa port for others:

They arrived in hundreds and thousands, from all the nooks and corners of the country where they lived. They landed at Apapa inside trippers, the kind of transport not used in carrying human beings in Nigeria but for transporting goods and animals – cows to be precise.<sup>12</sup>

Travellers waiting for transportation were treated as social outcasts, also in transit countries on their way to Ghana, Benin and Togo.<sup>13</sup> They suffered inextricable dehumanisation and appeared more than ever as stateless persons. By 15 February 1983, at the peak of the expulsion exercise, about one and half million foreigners had officially left the country: 700,000 Ghanaians, 180,000 Nigeriens, 120,000 Cameroonians, 150,000 Chadians, 5,000 Togolese, 5,000 Beninese, “and a host of others.”<sup>14</sup> According to Minister for Internal Affairs Alhaji Ali Baba, Ghanaians, Togolese and Nigeriens had been the aliens most involved in criminal and malicious acts in Lagos for over three years.<sup>15</sup> He was silent about the role of Nigerian citizens, thus suggesting that criminality was an imported phenomenon. According to Ali Baba, there was a national reduction in crime of about 60 percent during the expulsions.<sup>16</sup> In the fight against unemployment, the departure of Ghanaian teachers also released teaching positions in Lagos state, as remarked by a state executive, Dr Olawal Idriss:

Defending the employment of the illegal immigrants in the first place, Mr. Idriss said that the State Schools Management Board had been forced to take on qualified Ghanaian teachers because at that time, Nigerian graduates were unwilling to accept teaching jobs. “But right now”, he added “there are many of them who have been interviewed and are on the waiting list ready to work.”<sup>17</sup>

7 “Refugees”, *Sunday Sketch*, January 30, 1983.

8 “Airlines, Airlift Aliens”, *Daily Times*, February 3, 1983.

9 Tunji Adedigba, “Aliens Ask for More Time”, *Sunday Sketch*, January 23, 1983.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 “Agony of Waiting for the Black Star Line”, *Sunday Concord*, January 30, 1983.

13 “Benin, Nigeria: Border closed”, *Sunday Sketch*, January 23, 1983.

14 Wole Odunaike, “1.5m Illegal Aliens Gone Home”, *Daily Times*, February 15, 1983.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 Tunji Adedigba, “Aliens Ask for More Time”, *Sunday Sketch*, January 23, 1983.

The public expression of rejection was focusing on Ghanaians. It is pertinent to draw a comparison here with the Malians, who were less visible but well integrated through longstanding cultural and economic ties. From 1970 to 1984, the number of legal Malians increased from 85,000 to 113,000,<sup>18</sup> compared to Nigeriens, Chadians or Cameroonians and Ghanaians, who were the elites of migrants due to their professional qualifications. Most of the Malians residing at Lagos were security guards, artisans, carriers or hawkers. The Yorubas in Lagos, who were better educated and trained, alongside migrants from the Eastern Nigeria, had abandoned these sectors (Sada and Adegbola 1976, 192). Quite different from Ghanaians of Fanti or Yoruba cultures, the Malians were not in direct occupational competition with Nigerians from the South. The Malian migratory model differs from that of Ghanaians, who were brought to Nigeria by the British authorities as clerks. At least since the middle of the nineteenth century, young herdsmen or farmers had moved freely between Timbuktu and Lagos, where they either worked or sold their livestock for kola nuts or imported goods before returning to their place of origin. In the course of the travel and according to the opportunities, the *baragnini* or “job-seekers” (in the Bamana or Bambara language) (Gary-Toukara 2008, 179) looked for the quickest possible ways to reconvert to petty-trading, a very popular activity that gave substantial income. Most of them were Songhai, Tuaregs, Fulanis or Dagens, alongside Bambaras, Malinkes and Soninkes. In the countries to the south of Mali, from Côte d’Ivoire to Nigeria, this seasonal migration also occurred towards the riverine areas. As such, the equivalent of *baragninis* in Kano were referred to as *cin rani* (Mahadi and Inikori 1994, 67) or as those who “eat in dry season” in the Hausa language. In 1959, the geographer Mansell Prothero recorded the mobility of *cin rani* in Sokoto state, as well as peddlers of kola in Western Nigeria and Gold Coast, alongside migrants from Niger and other French territories.<sup>19</sup> According to Prothero, the

number of migrants from French colonies settled in Sokoto state increased by 250,000 between 1931 and 1952 (1959, 8). In the remaining parts of the North, one could observe a movement of peasants to and from cities in search of paid work, like Chadians sojourning in Maiduguri in Borno State where they were either house-helpers or artisans. Some of these migrants, from different origins, continued their journey towards southern cities, such as Ibadan where they came together in quarters initially reserved for migrants, the *sabo* (Fourchard 2009, 195).<sup>20</sup> In Lagos, the quarters of Agege, Yaba, Obalande and Lagos Island have high concentrations of migrants from the Nigerian Sahel and Francophones: “The low-income northerners consist chiefly of livestock dealers. Among them were also kola nut traders in Agege who settled in kola growing and collecting centres of the metropolis” (Sada and Adegbola 1976, 196–97). Because of this close interaction within *sabo*, reinforced by historical, cultural and symbolic ties, Malians were often confused with the Nigerian Hausa-Fulani.<sup>21</sup>

To add to the confusion, Nigeria had no system of national identity cards (Matthews 2002, 53), unlike their Francophone neighbours that had inherited an overbearing spirit of administrative control from the colonial authorities. It was therefore not so easy to identify undocumented Malians. The situation was the same in the places of departure of migrants because of the inefficiency of the civil registration system. The irony of history was that in some cases, as that of Shugaba, as we will see later, the court had used the colonial-era criteria for individual identification. Thus, in 1980, to establish the Chadian ascendance of Shugaba at Maiduguri, Alhaji Maitama Yusuf, the then Minister of Internal Affairs, brought a retired Chadian of Banana (or Masa) origin to testify. The latter affirmed that the mother of Shugaba was Chadian because she had a pierced tongue and pulled out teeth, tribal marks peculiar to the Bananas of pastoral tradition:

18 *Census of Nigeria, 1970–84*; Federal Ministry of Labor, *International Labor Statistics, Lagos, 1970–1980*, quoted by Arthur, 1991: 74.

19 Mansell Prothero was one of the proponents of the theory of push and pull of migrations, en vogue in the academic circle between the 1950s and 1970s.

L. A. Kosinski and R. M. Prothero, eds., *People on the Move: Studies on Internal Migration* (London, Methuen: 1974).

20 “In Ibadan, the density of migrants is undoubtedly much greater in the districts of Sabon Gari and Mokola, where the Hausa, Nupe and other

Northern peoples live, than in the other parts of the town” (Prothero 1959, 44).

21 Interview with Oumar Maiga, a Malian born in Abidjan in 1971, dealer in semi-precious stones, Ibadan, 26 November 2012.

She had both her lips pierced and those holes were visible to anyone looking at her. Also as a Banana woman, two of her teeth in the lower jaws had been removed (Ajayi 1981, 46).<sup>22</sup>

Three years prior to the expulsion of undocumented aliens, these methods of identification already underscored the inadequacies of some state services and the repressive strategy of the president with regard to his opponents. As it were, Malians did not consider themselves strangers in Nigeria, or *Nizeriya* in Bamana language, even though the situation changed at the beginning of 1983. Abdoulaye Dabo, a transnational seller based in Ibadan, was transporting cloths when the order for expulsion came:

I was at Mokwa [Niger State] that day. I was coming from Lomé on my way to Kano. Ha! That was serious. Because when I had heard that, I was with my luggage. I needed to go to Kano and sell. I sold my goods: I came to Mokwa. I learnt at Mokwa that no one could cross [the border] with money because there were policemen fighting immigration...<sup>23</sup>

Abdoulaye reacted in order to avoid having to carry liquid cash. He bought aluminium there at Mokwa, which he resold at Parakou in the Republic of Benin. Unlike thousands of his fellow citizens, according to available statistics, he escaped the expulsion.<sup>24</sup> As for Abdoulaye and others like him, they got no support either from the Malian government, nor from its consulates. From Parakou, he travelled to Lomé to wait for the situation in Nigeria to calm down. He later returned to Ibadan and settled in *sabo*.

In practice, the whole operation of identification, regrouping and expulsion of the undocumented turned out to be chaotic because the immigration service and the police were unprepared and there was no coordination with the migrants' states of origin. People neither had the time to be

regularised nor to prepare for their sudden departure. Despite the chaotic situation, a number of foreigners escaped being expelled with the help of Nigerian neighbours or friends. Some got their papers by marrying a Nigerian woman, others sought the support of their employers to obtain legal status.<sup>25</sup> Some others, finally, were probably hidden and protected by their neighbours.

## 2. Between Nationalist Vengeance and Domestically Driven Political Calculation

How does one interpret the expulsion of foreigners from the rest of the Community, Chad and Cameroon? What were its consequences in Nigeria's relationship with neighbouring countries? The matter quickly acquired a political dimension at both the international and local levels, but with different effects according to the nature of bilateral relations with the undocumented migrants' countries of origin. Concerning the Ghanaians, this will be shown further in this section. The eviction of foreigners isolated Nigeria within the Community, because it sent a negative signal concerning the regional integration policy, in which Nigeria was seeking to play an important role. The neighbouring states criticised the violation of the protocol on free movement of persons, which had been approved just three years earlier in the bid to set up the Community (Afoyolan 1988, 5). Little appreciated by Shagari, Liberian President Samuel Doe, stated that Nigeria could incite reciprocal expulsions: "We are concerned about the plight of those displaced West Africans and the repercussion it would have on millions of Nigerians living outside their country, many of whom are doing so illegally."<sup>26</sup> Firmly in control of Ghana since the coup of 1981, Jerry Rawlings, another rival of Shagari, called on his fellow citizens to return to Ghana in order to build an egalitarian society.<sup>27</sup> However, some Ghanaians preferred to go to Côte d'Ivoire, the richest country in Francophone

22 For more details about this group, read: Dumas-Champion, Françoise. 1983. *Les Masa du Tchad. Bétail et société*. Paris: Maison des sciences de l'homme.

23 Interview of 24 November 2012 at Ibadan. Abdoulaye is the president of Malians in Oyo State, attached to the Council of Malians in Nigeria with its headquarters at Lagos. Among his duties, he takes care of the relations between the members of his community and their neighbours and authorities.

24 "Les expulsions de Maliens en Afrique", *Jamana* [Bamako], July–October 1987, 59. This number was probably underestimated. The counting of border crossing of persons on the frontiers of Upper Volta is broken down as follows: 1048 persons for the segment of Koro-Bankass, 254 for Tominian-Mandiakuy, 26 at Koury. Through Niger Republic, 92 and 5, 313 persons crossed through the posts of Ménaka and Labézanga respectively. Archives of the Ministry of Territorial and Local Government

Administration (AMATCL), a reflection on the problem of refugees and the turning back of citizens by other countries, September 1983.

25 "Aliens Resort to Deals to Stay Put in Nigeria", *Sunday Concord*, January 23, 1983.

26 "Nigerians in Ghana Advised", *Sunday Concord*, February 6, 1983.

27 Ibid.



West Africa and the major host country of Malians, or trying their luck again in Nigeria once the tension calmed down.<sup>28</sup> The media publicity of the conditions of arrival of the repatriated shaped the reaction in the Francophone countries. The Republic of Benin protested against the influx of Ghanaians at its eastern borders and bemoaned the saturation of public intervention system. In Mali, the government remained discreet; the arrivals were taking place in the regional peripheries of Gao and Timbuktu. Criticised by African public opinion, Nigeria lost credibility in its role as the locomotive of the Community.

The expulsion of foreigners from Nigeria sparked off criticism from Western Europe. Pope John Paul II was deeply touched.<sup>29</sup> In the United Kingdom, the leader of the opposition, Michael Foot, denounced the expulsions.<sup>30</sup> This criticism did not go down well with a section of Nigerians, including those opposing the expulsion, who underlined the historical responsibility the United Kingdom in drawing the borders and, therefore, dividing African peoples, brothers and cousins whose political destiny diverged on the account of colonialism.<sup>31</sup> Faced with such a scale of protest, Nigerian diplomats were having a hard time remaking the image of the country in the international community.<sup>32</sup> They took cover behind the law: the repatriated had neither documents nor legal status and shifted responsibility for the situation to the bad will of the state of origin in receiving their citizens. The three million people (the largest expulsion in Africa) represented a negligible proportion of the Nigerian population, but this was not the case for the countries of origin (Okafor and Mac-Anigboro 1990, 59). The power relations imposed by Nigeria on its neighbours were untenable.

In Nigerian society, there was heated public debate between proponents and opponents of the expulsions: “The Nigerians received the news of the expulsion of aliens with mixed feelings. Some felt happy over it, others unhappy.

Some showed pity for the aliens, others were lukewarm, and those who employed illegal aliens bemoaned the collapse of their business.”<sup>33</sup> Supporters adopted the official posture, with financial considerations in mind. They saw themselves neither as nationalists nor as selfish, because Nigeria remained the biggest contributor to the institutions of the Community (Afolayan 1988, 15). And the slowdown of economic activity affected them first. In these conditions, they felt that national resources derived from oil production should benefit Nigerian citizens and not the Community via foreigners residing in the country, and who had no papers. It was as though, within the framework of the Community, Shagari had adopted the popular formula of Margaret Thatcher against the European Economic Community in 1979: “I want my money back!” This position calls to mind that of Côte d’Ivoire under Félix Houphouët-Boigny in 1958, when French West African (AOF) colonies obtained internal autonomy within the Franco-African Community. Côte d’Ivoire, where there were many migrant workers from the rest of AOF (from Upper-Volta and from French Sudan mainly), successfully opposed the retaining of a federal political structure desired by Senegal and French Sudan. It wanted to prevent a federal political entity from accessing its own commercial profits. One of the results of this decision was an exacerbation of nationalism and the expulsion of Dahomeans and Togolese, and a minority of Ghanaians and Nigerians of Yoruba origin, mistakenly identified as Dahomeans (Gary-Toukara 2008, 130). In 1960, AOF disappeared, to the satisfaction of Côte d’Ivoire and France. Later, in 1975, France expressed its reservations on the creation of the Community under the auspices of Nigeria, whose influence in its former colonies it wanted to curtail (Adesina 2007, 40).

From the perspective of score-settling, some Nigerians regarded the expulsion as a response to the expulsion of their fellow citizens from Ghana in 1969 (Afolayan 1988, 19). ). This was a sentiment that was shared by the Gha-

28 Soji Ajayi, “Second Coming of Aliens”, *Sunday Sketch*, June 26, 1983.

29 Kayode Soyinka, “Expulsion of Aliens: Nigerians Diplomats Fumble Abroad”, *Sunday Concord*, February 13, 1983.

30 Ibid.

31 Ola Balogun, “Illegal Aliens Issue: Pandering to Mob Xenophobia”, *Sunday Concord*, January 30, 1983.

32 Kayode Soyinka, “Expulsion of Aliens: Nigerians Diplomats Fumble Abroad”, *Sunday Concord*, February 13, 1983.

33 “Reactions: Mixed Feelings”, *Sunday Concord*, January 30, 1983.

naians suffering in transit camps, as was widely carried by the press: “Although the general feeling among Ghanaians was that Nigeria was retaliating for what happened to its citizens thirteen years previously in Ghana, when the Busia regime sent them packing, their main anger – specially as the days dragged slowly by, leaving them still waiting at the harbours and airports – was against their government and leader, Flt. Lt. J.J. Rawlings, whom some described, with disgust, as ‘an idiot,’ ‘a soldier who does not behave like one,’ and a ‘coward.’”<sup>34</sup> In 1969, Nigerians living in Ghana for several generations had been deported in brutal and dehumanising conditions (Olaniyi 2008, 12, 19). They returned to a country that they hardly knew and that was in the heat of a civil war, which Ghana had contributed indirectly to sustaining by according temporary recognition to the secessionist Republic of Biafra. Possessing strong academic, cultural and entrepreneurial capital, the repatriated were able to settle down or socially integrate. The economic growth that oil production stimulated from 1973 and the active support of the local authorities of Lagos and the Western State facilitated their reintegration.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, the sudden return of Nigerians from Ghana in 1969 was deeply engraved in the collective memory, and one of the interpretations of the 1983 expulsion was that Nigeria had taken its revenge on its historical rival. This major factor, from a psychological perspective, represents a desire to settle scores with the Ghanaian rival as an expression of nationalist vengeance. This took the form of a triple sanction: to remind Ghana of the pain of having to suddenly take care of one’s citizens, to exacerbate Ghana’s political difficulties, and to cut to size a country that was considered presumptuous and had since 1957 proclaimed itself the representative of sub-Saharan Africa. Shagari, conscious of this latent feeling of humiliation, made use of it to send a message to his own army, some of whom might have been

inspired by the charismatic model of Rawlings (Philippe 1983, 120). Subsequent events proved that he was not completely wrong as he was overthrown by General Buhari in December 1983, plunging Nigeria into a long period of military regimes.

On the other hand, a portion of public opinion, intellectuals and opponents of the government, criticised the expulsion. The condemnation were based on four points: the difficulty in identifying and differentiating foreigners from citizens, the breakdown of diplomatic relations, the diversion strategy of the president, and the reactivation of internal opposition among Nigerians, between indigenes and non-indigenes, which could weaken the new unity of the country. For the NPP of Dr. Azikiwe, on which the peoples of the Middle Belt – Anambara, Imo and Plateau States – placed their hopes during the general elections of 1979 (Joseph 1981, 31), Shagari pointed to foreigners because he needed scapegoats to make people forget the failure of the fight against unemployment (Afolayan 1988, 19), an argument that was relayed in Western Europe.<sup>36</sup> Alhaji Shugaba Darman, a leader of the GNPP, the dominant party in the House of Representatives of both Gongola and Borno states, underlined the risk of retaliation on Nigerian emigrants and the difficulty identifying foreigners in Borno, a border state to Niger Republic, Chad and Cameroon:

The deportation order would cause a lot of problems in Borno since it would not be easy to identify the aliens in certain parts of the state, especially at the border. He advised that caution should be exercised to avoid wrong deportation especially of Nigerians who do not have identity cards.<sup>37</sup>

Shugaba was talking with facts because he had been unjustly expelled to Chad three years earlier (Ajayi 1981).

34 May Ezekiel and Michael Awoyinka, “Exodus: Ghanaians Go Home”, *Sunday Concord*, January 30, 1983.

35 “A leading example of the deported entrepreneurs from Ghana was Chief David Adebayo Amao Alta who was honoured with the title of *Babalaje* (leader of business tycoons) of Ogbomosoland in recognition of his commercial contributions. He was a successful businessman and pioneer of manufacturing industries in Ogbomoso whose conglomerate

employed over 10,000 workers and agents between the 1970s and 1990s. He was educated at C.M.S Central School, Onisha and Commerce College, Kumasi Ghana. After his deportation from Ghana, where he had spent twenty-four years, Amo Alta served as co-founder of the union in Ogbomoso” (Olaniyi 2008, 25).

36 “In the Western world many believed that the quit order on foreigners was motivated by political considerations. They believed the action was timed

for an election year as a vote-catching stunt by an incumbent government which has suffered criticism at home especially on corruption and mounting unemployment.” Kayode Soyinka, “Expulsion of Aliens: Nigerians Diplomats Fumble Abroad”, *Sunday Concord*, 13 February 1983.

37 “Shugaba Warns on Deportation Order”, *Sunday Sketch*, January 30, 1983.

On 24 January 1980, the Minister of Internal Affairs accused him of being a Chadian and of having planned the assassination of members of the NPN of President Shagari in Borno State with the help of Chadian migrant workers. The GNPP representative was summarily expelled to a country that was in the middle of a civil war: Chad. Though his passport had been taken from him, he managed to get back to Maiduguri via Cameroon on 13 March, and argued his case at a judicial proceeding instituted under public pressure by the President. Shugaba won the case and got back his full rights as a Nigerian citizen. The case had been organised by the leaders of NPN of Borno, as stated by Justice Patrick Chukwuma Akpangbo during his judgement in Maiduguri on 25 July.

The applicant belongs to the GNPP according to his evidence and he is the Leader of the House. The NPN is their rival according to the evidence before me in this state and applicant's counsel has asked me to take judicial notice which I shall take that the 1st respondent, the Minister of Internal Affairs and the 3rd respondent His Excellency the President of Federal Republic also belong to the NPN the ruling party at the Federal level in Lagos. I cannot in this case before me rule out political victimisation from the evidence before me as I have reviewed that it was this political victimisation that led to the deportation of the applicant who has been in parties since 1951 starting with NEPU then NPC. The mother said that the applicant went to Mecca with Sardauna as she put it. (Ajayi 1981, 156–57)

One can make an instructive comparison with the use of Ivoirity in Côte d'Ivoire in the case of Alassane Dramane Ouattara, which occurred a decade later (Gary-Toukara 2010). Considered as a Burkinabe, Head of State Henri Konan Bédié prevented him from standing in presidential elections from 1995. In Côte d'Ivoire, although foreigners had had the right to vote in elections from 1960 to 1994, the two Dramanes were accused of not belonging to any national group. They were called upon to prove their identity, including bringing material proof of their maternal links – which led to a DNA test being conducted on the mother of Ouattara. In 2010, after contesting an election with the outgoing president, Laurent Gbagbo, Ouattara finally became president with the help of France and the

UN. Meanwhile, the country had undergone a long period of uncertainty as the doubt on Ouattara's origin insidiously extended to his real and supposed loyalists: the Dioula of the northern part of the country as well as Burkinabes and Malians. In protest at the political and administrative exclusion that ensued, a part of the army rebelled against President Gbagbo, and the country was divided into two from 2002 to 2010 (Soro 2005).

Among the intellectual critics was the writer and filmmaker Ola Balogun, of Yoruba origin. He drew attention to the populist and xenophobic mobilisation of the president: “the much touted expulsion order is no more than the desperate play of a leadership that is incapable of proposing any serious solutions to the current economic crisis in the country.”<sup>38</sup> Now, the president himself traced his ancient roots to the Fulani journey from Senegal to Sokoto, prelude to the theocratic revolution of Usman Dan Fodio (2001, 2). In the same way, on the eve of the colonial occupation, the father of Shugaba, born at Chigina in the southeast of present day Chad, had been recruited into the army of Sultan Gauramgama (Ajayi 1981, 81). The formidable conqueror Rebah defeated him in 1893, and he took refuge near the borders of Chad. The Baghirmi (father of Shugaba) then settled at Maiduguri in 1911 and married the mother of Shugaba, a Kanuri woman. Ola Balogun explained that the nature of African boundaries and the existence of trans-border communities implied a flexible management of international migration. According to him, neither Nigerian authorities nor those of neighbouring countries respected the rights of citizens to acquire a passport, which thwarted efforts to regularise illegal immigration. He asked a crucial question: after the mass repatriation of foreigners today: Whose turn will it be tomorrow? What if the indigenes of different Nigerian states followed the example of Shagari, but against non-indigenes, on the pretext that they are foreigners to the state? After the anti-Ibo riot of Kano in 1953 and the exodus of refugees during the civil war of 1967 to 1970 (Falola and Okpeh 2008), was Shagari not opening Pandora's box? Balogun queried thus:

38 Ola Balogun, “Illegal Alien Issue: Pandering to Mob Xenophobia”, *Sunday Concord*, January 30, 1983.

Do we fully realize the consequences of attempting to make each African state an island unto itself? And how much more time will elapse before each of the 19 states of the federation of Nigeria (or 9 or 65, if the advocates of state creation have their way), enacts a law requiring non-indigenes of each state to return their states of origin?<sup>39</sup>

To preserve national unity and confer equal rights on citizens, Nigeria reached an initial consensus by affirming the federal character of national and regional institutions and the principle of full citizenship in the state of origin. This was a legacy of the British administration that had defined the categories of indigenes and non-indigenes at a particular moment and based on political criteria; the law has continued to wrongly define the indigene. This paved way for new conflicts on the problematic category of strangers. Qualified as “scissiparous federalism” (Bach 1988, 22), the multiplication of states was intended to prevent the supremacy of Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba and Ibo groups. But it actually perpetuated this supremacy insofar as it shifted tensions over access between indigenes and non-indigenes to economic resources at the local level.

For the Malians, the expulsion was seen as nationalist vengeance in reaction to the expulsion of Nigerians from Ghana in 1969, a sort of jealousy towards Ghanaian managerial staff and a political manoeuvre by the president. Moussa Toukara, a former *baragnini*, now a seller of semi-precious stones in Lagos, described the tension and the confusion that were in the air at the time of expulsion:

Anyway, people, they talked a lot. Some said that it wasn't everybody, [it was for] the Ghanaians, some others, they said that Shagari [said] that it is the Ghanaians, they must go back to Ghana. Others, they say that it is for foreigners. But what I told you, at that time, in Nigeria, there [was] a lot of brutality: everybody [was] afraid. That is why everybody, they started to leave, but we, we didn't leave [the country]<sup>40</sup>.

In other words, the authorities were targeting foreigners, particularly the Ghanaians, even though that was officially denied. The testimony of Moussa Cissé, also a seller at Idu-mota, was rather more explicit:

What all of us understood was that there were foreigners who voted against Shagari. When Shagari became president, it was to be revoted [*sic*, reelected...]. Some people say other things, which is [*sic*] not the same, that is possible. But what we all followed [understood] was that [...] that is to say, there were cases, for example, if you arrive at zone [a place, an area], you can't say the names of people [target them directly]; all the strangers should be chased away, at the same time. Otherwise, Malians are not conscious enough in these zones, as were the Ghanaians, the Beninese and Yorubas.<sup>41</sup>

Cissé, who also escaped the expulsion, believes that the president, campaigning for re-election in August 1983, suspected Ghanaians of serving as a disguised electoral reserve for the opposition, and expelled all the foreigners so as not to reveal his political manoeuvre. Among other things, the GNPP of Shugaba, the NPP of Dr Azikiwe and the Unity Party of Nigeria of Chief Obafemi Awolowo had formed a coalition against the NPN: the Progressive Parties Alliance (Falola and Ihonvbere 1985, 78). Awolowo, Shagari's main rival, depended especially on the electoral support of citizens of Yoruba extraction (Joseph 1981, 30). A rumour circulated that the opposition was intending to have foreigners register and vote fraudulently, especially Ghanaians and Yoruba (Gravil 1985, 528). This explanation, surprising *a priori*, cannot be neglected given the weight of ethnic affiliation in Nigerian political culture and the fact that one could mistake a Ghanaian for a Nigerian from the West, and a Nigerien, a Malian or a Chadian for a northern Nigerian. On transnational communities, Balogun pointed out the historical and cultural proximity of some Nigerians with the illegal immigrants expelled by Shagari:

In the end, there is no escaping the fact that in the overwhelming majority of cases, we are not dealing with a faceless entity known as “illegal aliens”, but with our own kith and kin from other African countries, even if the circumstances of colonial partition of African countries have conferred different nominal nationalities on us for the present.

What is the real difference between a Yoruba man from Benin Republic and a Yoruba man from Nigeria, or a Hausa man from Nigeria and his cousin from Niger Republic? Does a Fulbe pastoralist from the north of Cameroun Republic have different blood in his veins from the Fulani herdsman in Sokoto?

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Interview, November 2012, Lagos.

<sup>41</sup> Interview, 1 December 2012, Lagos.

Even more to the point, does the villager from Ogoja necessarily have more in common with his fellow Nigerian citizen from Bornu than with a Fanti tribesman from Ghana, beyond the accident of their having found themselves together or not within the confines of a colonial entity administered as a single unit by Great Britain?<sup>42</sup>

After the political conspiracy against Shugaba, this rumour continued to fuel an atmosphere of generalised suspicion against foreigners at the end of Shagari era. Without being said openly, the expulsion of foreigners in general, and Ghanaians in particular, was aimed at depriving Awolowo of a part of his supposed electoral base. Another event had contributed to questioning the place of foreigners in socio-political life: the Maitatsine riot in Kano in December 1980. This social mobilisation of poor Northern youths, mostly Nigerians, under the guise of religious demands, was led by Muhammadu Marwa, a preacher of Cameroonian origin. It turned into a rebel movement composed of foreigners, who were arrested, tried, convicted and expelled to Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Mali (Usman 1987, 77–80). The political and media handling of the Maitatsine and Shugaba cases by the president therefore contributed in forging a prejudice or feeling that foreigners were a threat to the security of the country and its leaders at the regional level. In a tense pre-electoral context, they equally appeared as riggers who were trying, with the supposed help of the opposition, to influence the choice of citizens by registering illegally to vote. Considering the aftermath of the events of Kano and the expulsion of Shugaba, the persons interviewed in the course of this research drew a link between the expulsion of 1983 and what happened three years earlier.<sup>43</sup> Be that as it may, economic crisis and unemployment found a fertile ground for the public expression of xenophobia.

### 3. Conclusion

Quite brutal in its formulation and implementation, the expulsion of illegal foreign immigrants from the rest of the Community, Cameroon and Chad left an enduring mark in

the national consciousness and the local languages. Reinterpreted in the context of post-expulsion, the popular expression “Ghana-must-go” is a proof of this event: since 1983, it refers to the type of bag used by people to transport goods and materials, alluding to the Ghanaians who fled hurriedly from the country, having only bags as luggage.

Beyond being a classical response of a government battling with heavy social effects of economic crisis, the expulsion also reveals another less obvious fact: the use of the foreigner label by President Shagari in trying to disqualify his political opponents or to generate public support. In 1980, in the wake of his election, he caused the deportation of Shugaba, accused of being a Chadian and of having planned the assassination of a representative of his party in Borno. The legal action instituted to clarify facts decided that it was a government conspiracy and rehabilitated Shugaba, who had succeeded in coming back to Maiduguri. In 1983, on the eve of a presidential election accompanied by crisis, the expulsion of foreigners emanates from another government strategy, which caused a rumour to circulate that the opposition was planning to make foreigners vote illegally, especially those of Yoruba origin like Ghanaians. This throws more light on the expulsion of 1983, which simultaneously symbolised a confrontation by proxy between the president and Chief Awolowo, his major rival. The xenophobic mobilisation thus crystallised on Ghanaians. In a political society and culture that is still characterised by the weight of clientelism and ethnic affiliations, as well as transnational social links, the expulsion is regarded as the double response of the president: chase away foreigners from the national labour market on one hand, and on the other, weaken the supposed electoral base of his rival. This is not only explained by the number or the social position of Ghanaians but also by the internal political stakes that appear on nationalist and identity terrain, thus creating suspicion against opponents and “bad” foreigners. In its nationalist dimension, the eviction of

<sup>42</sup> Ola Balogun, “Illegal Alien Issue: Pandering to Mob Xenophobia”, *Sunday Concord*, January 30, 1983.

<sup>43</sup> I thank Patrick Oloko for putting me on this track.

Ghanaians from Nigeria also meant retaliation for the expulsion of Nigerians residing in Ghana in 1969.

The Head of State, who had tried to rebrand his image by expelling illegal foreigners, precipitated his own fall because he was not able to improve the economic situation, which led to the return of the army to power. Despite the

context of crisis, migrants represented a useful and sought-after source of labour to Nigerian entrepreneurs and employers, especially in the informal sector, hence the return of migrant workers. In 1985, this time on the initiative of Buhari, half a million illegal residents were expelled again from the country.

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