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# Nigerian Emigration to the United States: A Historical Analysis of Post-Colonial Nigeria

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**Abstract:** Nigerian immigrants are the largest African immigrant group<sup>183</sup> and the most educated among the Sub-Saharan African and Caribbean immigrant groups<sup>184</sup> in the United States. The complex and diverse Nigerian immigrant population in the United States is reflective of the socio-political history and present context of Nigeria. This paper investigates Nigerian migration studies through a historical analysis of Post-Colonial Nigeria through the understandings of social organization, colonial legacy, and migration as African autonomy. This comparative analysis explores the two time periods of Nigerian migration to the United States: the late colonial and early Independence period (1950s to 1970s) and the end of the late twentieth century and early twentieth century (1980s to 2010s). Nigerian migrants, and other West African migrants, have pursued economic and social mobility abroad since the early Independence period (1950s to 1970s). The socio-political context of Nigeria and individual ambitions of migrants are demonstrated in the changing scope and scale of migration patterns. This study aims to analyze the impacts of British colonialism, national development, and decolonization projects to analyze historical Nigerian migration. This study offers immense scholarly contribution to further uncover the story of Nigerian migration in the present context by utilizing immigrant population and remittance data.

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## Introduction

In this paper, I examine the changing scope and scale of Nigerian immigration to the United States. Nigerian emigration to the United States has been driven by various factors that reflect the country's social, political, and economic experiences. The history and politics of Nigerian emigration is also tied to individual and group aspirations for educational and economic opportunities abroad. In the late colonization and early independence period, the 1950s to the 1980s, emigration was reflective of nation-building and decolonization projects. The pursuit of higher education and economic opportunities in the United States and Britain were to develop the next generation of Nigerian leaders. Yet, it is also noteworthy that for the majority of Nigerian migrants in this period, the journey abroad was imagined as

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<sup>183</sup> Migration Policy Institute. (2015, June). *The Nigerian Diaspora in the United States*. Rockefeller Foundation-Aspen Institute Diaspora Program (RAD). Retrieved November 16, 2021, from <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/RAD-Nigeria.pdf>.

<sup>184</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, 2008-2012. American Community Survey. <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/>.

temporary. The conceptual goal of Nigerian migration to the United States and Britain was that this generation would contribute to the newly decolonized and independent Nigeria. By the end of the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century, Nigerian migration was tied to the country's political instability and to individual ambitions to pursue educational or economic opportunities. Sustaining connections to home is a consistent element of Nigerian immigration throughout the modern context of Nigerian emigration. Sustaining connections to home is exemplified in Nigerian immigrants' societal organization and use of remittances in the United States. The historical analysis of migration trends is useful for analyzing the change of Nigerian history and Nigerian immigrants' dynamics. Nigerian immigrants and migration trends prove to be dynamic and multifaceted. Nigerians are not emigrating in the modern context for the same reason they were in the early independence period. With every country and migrant group, one can analyze internal events and track a country's history and socio-political context. I argue that Nigerian emigration is a tool and lens to analyze the social and political context of post-colonial Nigeria.

Many West African immigrants leave their country of origin with aspirations to return after achieving discrete financial goals.<sup>185</sup> West Africans have historically emigrated to maximize their educational and financial opportunities. In migration studies, push factors are defined as the reasons that people are leaving their place or region of origin. Some common push factors for West Africans are political, environmental, or ethno-nationalistic crises. Political conflict due to unstable governments, ethno-nationalistic conflicts originating in the violence that is colonialism, and the environmental crisis disproportionately affecting West African coastal regions, are significant challenges that West Africans encounter. On the other hand, as the World Economic Forum reports African countries have some of the world's fastest growing economies. "Africa's annual GDP growth has consistently outpaced the global average and is expected to remain at least 6% until 2023. Six of the world's 10-fastest growing economies are in Africa."<sup>186</sup> The globalization and technological advancements of the World has permitted these post-colonized nations to trade and communicate with foreign markets. Thus, West African immigrants are integrated into a globalized world and pursuing economic and educational opportunities abroad.

### **Nigerian Immigrants in the United States**

The United States is one of the top destinations for Nigerian emigrants seeking economic and educational opportunities because of the stable US economy, economic and educational opportunities, and

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<sup>185</sup> For a detailed overview of Nigerian migration patterns to the U.S., see Oyebamiji, Sunday Israel, and Abimbola Adekoye. "Nigerians' Migration to the United States of America: A Contemporary Perspective." *Journal of African Foreign Affairs* 6, no. 1 (2019).

<sup>186</sup> Landry Signe, "6 Of the World's Ten Fastest-Growing Economies Are in Africa." *World Economic Forum*, August 6, 2019. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/08/afcfta-proof-that-africa-heading-for-substantial-growth/>.

the large Nigerian American community. The Migration Policy Institute reports that in 2010, the population of Nigerian immigrants in the US was 219,000. In 2017 the population increased to 345,000<sup>187</sup>. From 2010 to 2019, their population had a 79% increase.<sup>188</sup>

The immigration and presence of Nigerian migrants in the United States have created informal social cohesion. Informal social cohesion of Nigerian immigrants in the United States is exemplified in community and professional organizations. As reported in a 2015 report by the Migration Institute:

[Nigerian organizations] promote the development of Nigeria, the arts and culture of the homeland, women's empowerment, or the provision of health and other social services to Nigeria's most vulnerable populations. Many of these groups focus on a shared subnational ethnic identity, such as Yoruba or Igbo, a testament to Nigeria's wealth of linguistic and cultural traditions.<sup>189</sup>

Cultural and national unity is prevalent in Nigerian immigrant communities in the United States. There is a relationship between the location of community organizations and a large presence of Nigerian immigrants. The data by the Migration Policy Institute shows the top counties with Nigerian immigrants in figure 1 (below).

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<sup>187</sup> Jie Zong, and Jeanne Batalova. "Immigrants from New Origin Countries in the United States." *Migration Policy Institute*. Migration Policy Institute, January 17, 2019.

<https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/immigrants-new-origin-countries-united-states-2017>.

<sup>188</sup> Jeanne Batalova, Mary Hanna, and Christopher Levesque. "Frequently Requested Statistics on Immigrants and Immigration in the United States." *Migration Policy Institute*, February 11, 2021.

<https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/frequently-requested-statistics-immigrants-and-immigration-united-states-2020>.

<sup>189</sup> Migration Policy Institute. (2015, June). *The Nigerian Diaspora in the United States*. Rockefeller Foundation-Aspen Institute Diaspora Program (RAD). Retrieved November 16, 2021, from <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/RAD-Nigeria.pdf>.

### U.S. Immigrant Population by State and County, 2015-2019

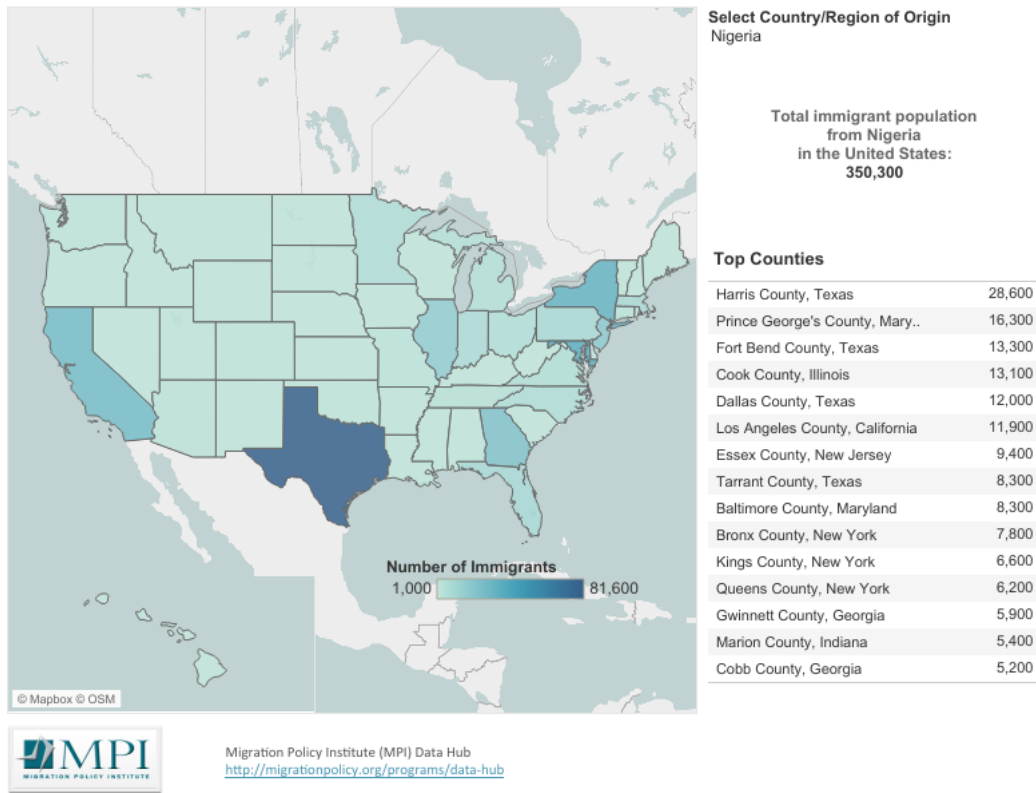


Figure 1. Migration Policy Institute tabulation of data from the U.S. Census Bureau's pooled 2015-2019 American Community Survey.

The map data shows that the states of Texas, California, Georgia, Maryland, New York, and Illinois have the highest number of Nigerian immigrants. The top five counties with Nigerian immigrants are Harris County, Texas, Prince George's County, Maryland, Fort Bend County, Texas, Cook County, Illinois, and Dallas County, Texas. These counties are located in or near major metropolitan cities such as Houston, Dallas, Washington D.C., and Chicago. These large Nigerian immigrant populations are evocative of the importance of Nigerian identity and community in the United States. Nigerian community organizations in these areas include the Nigerian Foundation and Nigerian Union Diaspora in Texas, Nigerian Igbo Catholic Community and Nigerian Friendship Association in Maryland, and the Nigerian Islamic Center in Illinois. There are numerous community organizations using national identity to instill community and few sub-national identity groups. In the United States, "Nigerian-ness" and national identity become attached to the immigrants' mutual pursuit of economic advancement. Therefore, immigrant group's mutual ambitions to pursue economic and educational opportunities in the United States is demonstrated in Nigerian business and professional organizations. Oyebamiji and Adekoye wrote:

They [Nigerian business and professional organizations] are formed for the empowerment of their people in the United States and those in their native Nigeria....All

of them also try to use their technical and professional training and experience to help their communities in the United States and Nigeria in the areas of health care delivery, charitable and legal assistance, private business and industrial development including poverty alleviation; apart from career development which is their primary focus.<sup>190</sup>

Examples of these business and professional organizations include the Organization of Nigerian Professions (ONP-USA), Nigerian Business Forum, Inc., Pro-Health International and Nigerian Professional Network. Others are Songhai Charities Inc., African Bar Association of America (ABAA) and Action Against Poverty International Inc.<sup>191</sup> These community organizations show the relevance of community building for Nigerian immigration populations in the United States. Remittances demonstrate an immigrant’s ability to send money to family and loved ones in their country of origin. In host country’s governments can support policies that reduce costs of money transfers and remittances to migrant’s home countries. Remittances and community building through organizations are an asset for Nigerian migrants aspiring to attain economic mobility and support family and loved ones at home. Analysis of remittances data from the global consultant group, PwC, show that as of 2018 Nigeria is the second top remittance receiver in Africa. Nigeria received USD 25.1 billion in remittances, following behind Egypt. Figure 2 below displays the impactful relationship between Nigeria’s remittance flows and GDP. The data shows that between 2014 and 2018, official remittances from Nigerian immigrants have exceeded Nigeria’s oil revenue.

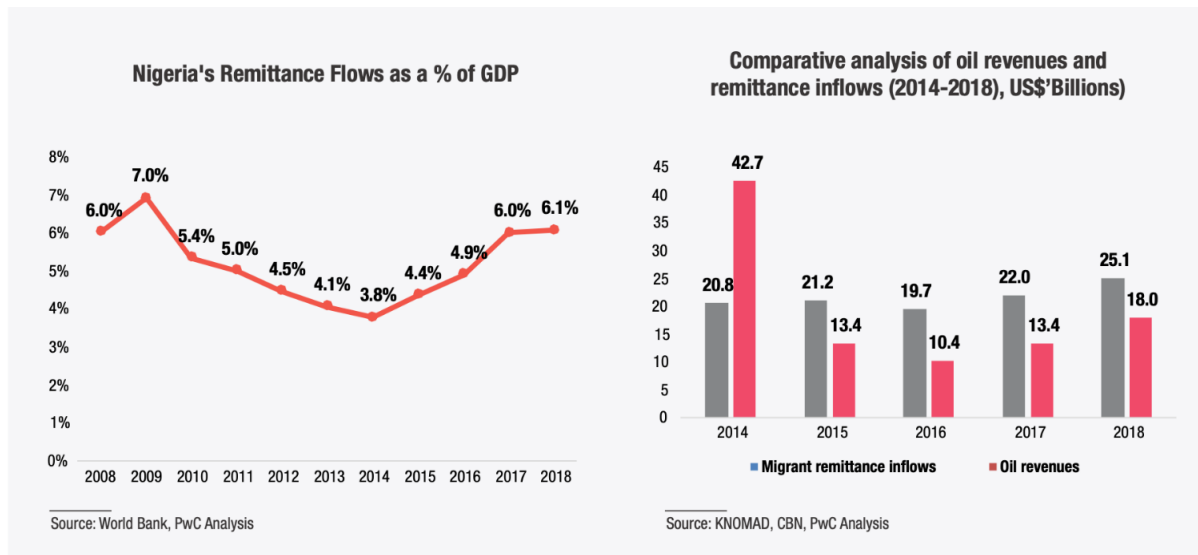


Figure 2. PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC). *Strength from Abroad: The Economic Power of Nigeria’s Diaspora*, 2019.

<sup>190</sup> Oyebamiji and Adekoye. “Nigerians’ Migration to the United States of America: A Contemporary Perspective.”

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 177.

Nigerian immigrants' remittances surpassed the country's oil revenue since 2015 and is 6.1% of Nigeria's GDP in 2018. This shows that Nigerian migrants have a large impact on their nation's economy. The quantitative data presented in this section shows a consistent increase of Nigerian immigrants in the United States. This quantitative data paired with the history of Nigerian emigration helps to analyze Nigerian migration scopes and trends.

### **Historical Nigerian Emigration**

In the 1960's, the immediate post-independence period of Nigeria, the United States passed the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act which abolished the previous quota system that had restricted immigration based on national origin. The new policy allowed for the reunion of immigrant families and began to attract skilled laborers to the United States. In 1980, on the Foreign-Born Population U.S. Census Data, Nigeria was added for the first time. Previous to this Nigeria was not listed as a country of origin rather the category "Africa n.e.c."<sup>192</sup> was used for those born within the continent that weren't recorded from a specific country of origin. Whereas, in the 1960 Foreign-Born Population the U.S. Census Data there were 8,302 people from Cape Verde and 5,756 people recorded as "Africa n.e.c.". In 1970, Cape Verde foreign-born population increased by 10,000 and the "Africa n.e.c." category increased to 21,4000.<sup>193</sup> The addition of Nigeria as a country on the foreign-born Census is indicative of the Nigerian presence in the United States. However, this does not take away from Nigerian presence before 1980.

According to the Migration Policy Institute in 1978 there were 2,000 Nigerian immigrant students and professionals in the United States and increased to 10,000 in 1984<sup>194</sup>. The immigrant's categorization by their nationality, Nigerian, in the United States was strikingly different to their sub-national identities such as Igbo, Hausa, Yoruba, and various others. While in the United States, Nigerian-Americans began to unify according to their nationality. This emphasis on nationality was likely due to the way Nigerian immigrants are identified within the United States, and to specify and create community in the presence of many other African-country immigrant groups. The presence of Nigerian Americans in the United States during the African post-independence period is reflective of migration as a way of nation-building in the 1960s to 1980s. The modern context of the increasing Nigerian immigrant population is due to

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<sup>192</sup> N.e.c., not elsewhere classified.

<sup>193</sup> Gibson, Campbell, and Kay Jung. Rep. *Historical Census Statistics on the Foreign-Born Population of the United States: 1850 to 2000*. Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau, 2006.

<sup>194</sup> Blessing U. Mberu, Roland Pongou. "Nigeria: Multiple Forms of Mobility in Africa's Demographic Giant." *Nigeria: Multiple Forms of Mobility in Africa's Demographic Giant*. Migration Policy Institute, June 30, 2010. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/nigeria-multiple-forms-mobility-africas-demographic-giant>.

individual educational and economic pursuits leaving behind the colonial shadow that is disrupting Nigeria's economy and politics.

### **The Colonial Roots of Nigerian Political Instability and Economic Precarity**

The legacy of colonialism in Nigeria is embodied in its prolonged political instability. British colonization of the people of Nigeria imposed the consolidation of a varied ethnic groups and languages. Within the boundaries of Nigeria there are 36 states, over 250 ethnic groups and over 500 languages.<sup>195</sup> Conflict and political instability are almost unavoidable. The various ethnic, religious, and cultural differences within Nigeria are a result of the colonial drawing of borders. These ethnic groups were previously empires with their own government and societal laws. The Council on Foreign Relations discusses the nature of Nigerian precolonial history:

Before Europeans arrived in the territory that is now Nigeria, a number of different civilizations existed whose presence is still felt today. For example, in the north, Islam was predominant. In the nineteenth century, there were two Islamic empires, the Sokoto Caliphate, and the Bornu Empire. To the southwest lay numerous Yoruba city-states that generally had in common animist religion and were only sometimes united. To the southwest was an Igbo kingdom, Nri, and a collection of semi-autonomous towns and villages in the Niger River Delta. Such regions were linguistically, religiously, and politically distinct.<sup>196</sup>

British colonial rule and the colonization period of Nigeria happened between 1851 and 1960. Britain's interest in colonizing Nigeria was due to the desire for control of natural resources that include palm oil, cocoa, cotton, and tin and the expansion of British rule. British colonization in Nigeria was carried out through military control and alliances with indigenous rulers. In Northern Nigeria, British officials used indirect rule policies that permitted traditional authorities to exercise sway on judicial, property, and issues related to "custom." As John Campbell described in his article on Lord Lugard, the architect of indirect rule, "The structure for the 'native' population was that of the Native Authorities and Native Treasuries, using the traditional chiefs and forms of government supervised by the British colonial administrators (hence the term 'indirect rule')." <sup>197</sup> However, in Southern Nigeria British officials utilized

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<sup>195</sup> "CIFORB Country Profile Nigeria Reviewed." Commonwealth Initiative for Freedom of Religion or Belief: Nigeria. University of Birmingham. Accessed November 14, 2021.

<https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/college-artslaw/ptr/ciforb/resources/Nigeria.pdf>.

<sup>196</sup> John Campbell. "Lord Lugard Created Nigeria 104 Years Ago." *Council on Foreign Relations*, January 2, 2018. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/lord-lugard-created-nigeria-104-years-ago>.

<sup>197</sup> R.K Home. "Town Planning, Segregation and Indirect Rule in Colonial Nigeria." *Third World Planning Review* 5, no. 2 (May 01, 1983): 165.

<http://libproxy.temple.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/town-planning-segregation-indirect-rule-colonial/docview/1308648028/se-2?accountid=14270>.

direct rule policies through strong show of military and police control. Between 1901 and 1919, Lord Lugard was the first colonial governor of Northern Nigeria and later all of Nigeria. He wrote “British Policy in Nigeria” in the *Journal of the International Institute of African Languages and Culture* where he describes the Nigerian people as “savages” and “barbaric” and details the tactics of indirect rule. Many books and works by Lord Lugard and his wife, who named Nigeria, construct the foundation of British colonial attitudes and colonial nature in Nigeria. Lord Lugard and other European colonizers justified their actions in Africa in the name of “moral progress” and expanding “modern civilization”.

### **Self Determination and Post-Colonial Development**

Dynamic changes and transformations in the West African region have occurred during the post-independence period. The process of decolonization is a continuous one that involves social, political, and economic sectors. The integration of African nation-states onto the international stage cause significant adjustments and changes in these new nation’s societies. The current political and economic context of West Africa is a direct result of exploitation through colonialism and neo-colonialism. Asfa-Wossen Asserate, the author of *African Exodus*, states the ways in which colonial powers affect African countries:

The various colonial regimes left their mark on Africa. They changed the entire political, economic, and social fabric of the continent... Traditional political and administrative structures were done away with, and intact communities and economic systems destroyed.<sup>198</sup>

The exploitation of West Africa continued even after independence. West African exploitation was and is epitomized in areas of labor, natural resources, and politics, and more. The decolonization project of Nigeria, and Africa alike, began in the independence movement but continues today in the dismantling of colonial institutions and hegemonic restrictive structures.

In the historical context, decolonization projects in Africa included the migration of students and specialists to the United States to further their education and skills and to later return to their home countries. United States President John F. Kennedy was the first American President to make efforts to court African nationalism in the post-independence period. President Kennedy initiated economic and educational programs to aid in Africa’s development and restructuring. In the book “Betting on the Africans: John F. Kennedy’s Courting of African Nationalist Leaders,” Phillip Muehlenbeck outlines and presents President Kennedy’s statement and efforts to promote African development:

‘We must answer the critical African need... by bringing far greater numbers of African students – future African leaders --- to our own universities for training.’ Projects such as the joint endeavor between Michigan State University and USAID to establish the

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<sup>198</sup> Asfa-Wossen Asserate, *African Exodus: Migration and the Future of Europe*. Haus Publishing Ltd, 2018, 47-48.



University of Nigeria, as well as smaller-scale teacher training and primary school building programs, proved extremely beneficial for Africans.<sup>199</sup>

President Kennedy made diplomatic efforts and developed programs to bridge the relationship between the United States and Nigeria. The relationship between the United States and Nigeria touched on the topic of migration as a way to further develop Nigeria in its process of decolonization. On the Independence Day of Nigeria, October 1, 1960, President Kennedy wrote a letter to the Prime Minister of Nigeria detailing his efforts to aid in their development stating that,

I proposed several months ago the establishment of an African Educational Development Fund, to make available more educational specialists, teachers, and material, and to provide for more university, professional, and other scholarships to Nigerian students and specialists.<sup>200</sup>

President Kennedy was persistent in his implementation of policy and diplomatic efforts to oppose European colonialism and support African development in the early Independence period for African nation-states.

The current struggle for liberation and decolonization is ongoing for independent nations like Nigeria, due to continued dependence on Western aid and lasting intervention in domestic affairs by European and North American governments. As scholar Natsu Taylor Saito analyzes decolonization in “Different Paths” in the *Journal of Law and Political Economy*.

Decolonization entails the exercise of self-determination by colonized peoples, and this implies that it cannot be legislated from above or directed by well-intentioned outsiders but, rather must be envisioned and implemented from the ground up.<sup>201</sup>

Scholar Saito’s analysis highlights the autonomy of colonized peoples in their conceptualization and agency in the struggle for decolonization. Similarly, Tendayi Achiume states negotiating full sovereignty and self-determination has continued, formally and informally, for many African countries. Achiume writes:

For many Third World peoples, their nation-states have failed to deliver on the promises that animated anticolonial movements. Neocolonialism has been a significant factor in their continued suffering...In other words, for some in the Third World, decolonization as

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<sup>199</sup> Muehlenbeck, Philip E. *Betting on the Africans: John F. Kennedy’s Courting of African Nationalist Leaders*. Oxford University Press, 2014 pp. 15.

<sup>200</sup> John F. Kennedy, Letter to Honorable Alhaji Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, prime minister. “Statement by Senator John F. Kennedy on Nigeria Independence,” September 22, 1960.

<sup>201</sup> Natsu Taylor Saito, “Different Paths”. *Journal of Law and Political Economy*, vol. 1, pp. 60, Georgia State University College of Law, Legal Studies Research Paper No. 2020-08, October 26, 2020. Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3719534>.

a strategy for self-determination is more realistically pursued as reformation, rather than severance, of the relationship of dependence.<sup>202</sup>

The ebb and flow of Nigerian immigration is related to this ongoing decolonization process. In 1960, the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples. This declaration was crucial in fueling the push for independence within African territories that remained under European colonial rule. As Saito explains, “all peoples have the right to self-determination’ and ‘by virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic and cultural development.’”<sup>203</sup> Yet, in many respects, as argued above, these goals have not been realized. A major push factor of Nigerian emigration is the pursuit of economic and social development that are either scarce or absent in their home country. Historically, in the immediate post-Independence period Nigerian emigration was intertwined with nation-building and decolonization projects, to further the advancement of Nigeria. In the modern context, Nigerian emigration epitomizes self-determination in the pursuit of individual economic and educational ambitions.

### **Push and Pull Factors**

The push and pull factors of Nigerian emigration have changed over time and are reflective of Nigerian socio-political context in the respective time periods. Common drivers of Nigerian emigration that I focus on in this essay are instability of the political government, ethno-religious conflicts, and the pursuit of economic growth and development. Nigerians are immigrating to the United States to secure job opportunities that are not otherwise available in Nigeria. In “Determinants of International Migration: The Nigerian Experience” Samuel Antwi Darkwah and Nahanga Verter highlight the lack of job opportunities in Nigeria:

Lack of employment opportunities in...Nigeria is another strong push factor for cross-border migration...[the] drastic increase in the unemployment rate in Nigeria over the past two decades, from 3.1% in 1991 to 23.9% in 2011.<sup>204</sup>

Nigerian emigration to the United States permits the development and pursuit of individual’s ambitions whether economic, educational or both. Nigerian migration to the United States, like other migrant groups, is in pursuit of the “American dream” that is not otherwise available to them in their home country. Despite Nigerian immigrants leaving their home, the historical and social context of Nigeria is eternally ramified to their identity in the United States.

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<sup>202</sup> Tendayi E. Achiume, “Migration as Decolonization.” *Stanford Law Review* 71, no. 6 (June 2019): 1509–74.

<sup>203</sup> Natsu Taylor Saito, “Different Paths”. Pp. 62.

<sup>204</sup> Darkwah, Samuel Antwi, and Nahanga Verter. "Determinants of International Migration: The Nigerian Experience." [In Czech]. *Acta Univ. Agric. Silvic. Mendel. Brun.* 62, no. 2 (May 2014): 321-7.

## **Conclusion**

The legacy of British colonialism and the impact on Nigeria has caused Nigerians to pursue their dreams abroad. This is exemplified in the large number of Nigerian immigrant populations in the United States. Nigerian migration patterns have changed in scope and scale since the post-independence period. As analyzed in this essay, Nigerian immigration, historically and presently, has wider implications for Nigerian national development and economic development (through remittances). The emigration of Nigerians and the strong Nigerian American community, economically, and socially, exemplify that the future of Nigeria's development is not only occurring within the country but also abroad. Further analysis of Nigerian migration studies would examine the relationship between Nigerian identity (sub-national and national) within Nigerian migrants in the United States. The incorporation of the Nigeria-Biafra Civil War into the historical analysis of Nigerian nationalism would provide a complete understanding of its ethnic and socio-political history and its impact on Nigerian immigrant communities in the United States. The strong Nigerian diasporic population in the United States, displayed through population data and societal organization imply their complex identity, community, and investment in their community and roots (Nigeria). Nigerian immigrants in the United States are pursuing advancement and development for themselves and their country, emerging through colonial shadows.

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Figure 1. Migration Policy Institute tabulation of data from the U.S. Census Bureau's pooled 2015-2019 American Community Survey. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/programs/data-hub/charts/us-immigrant-population-state-and-county>.

Figure 2. PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC). Strength from Abroad: The Economic Power of Nigeria's  
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