

Chapter 8

East African Youths in Motion: Exploring Opportunities in Asia

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Abstract

This paper is a preliminary introduction to the study of the East African youths, who are organizing their livelihoods by moving to relatively more pristine migration destinations. We introduce a project that will engage the existing perspectives in migration studies by offering insights into the African migrants at the source countries by asking two questions: What is bringing the youths in Eastern Africa to Japan? Our second question is, who is coming to Japan? We ask these questions to explore African youth's precariousness in countries that are not a direct target of Japanese migration policies with the primary aim to bring the analysis of African migrants from the peripheries to the core; we argue that this can illuminate new perspectives on Japanese migration policies and the general understanding of African livelihoods. To do this, we will integrate migration and global studies; the main focus will be on the interconnectivity (resulting from globalisation) that have been attracting African youths to Japan. We do this by underscoring the context of the youths, who are potential candidates for migration, in Eastern Africa. As this paper focuses on the context at the origin of migrants, we will refer to these young people as being in 'motion'. We hope that this paper will provide a foundation for a more comprehensive project on recent trends and actors of migration from Africa to Japan. Thus, this is a background paper that sets a foundation for future explorations of the precarious and nuanced conditions propelling the young generation to seek opportunities in the Middle East and Asia as new frontiers.

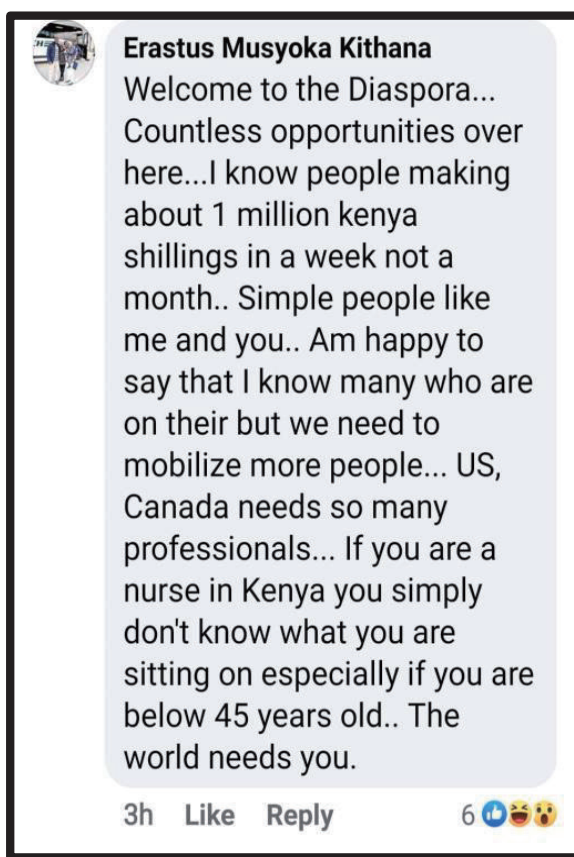
Keywords: East Africa, youths, labour migration, religious mobility, Japan



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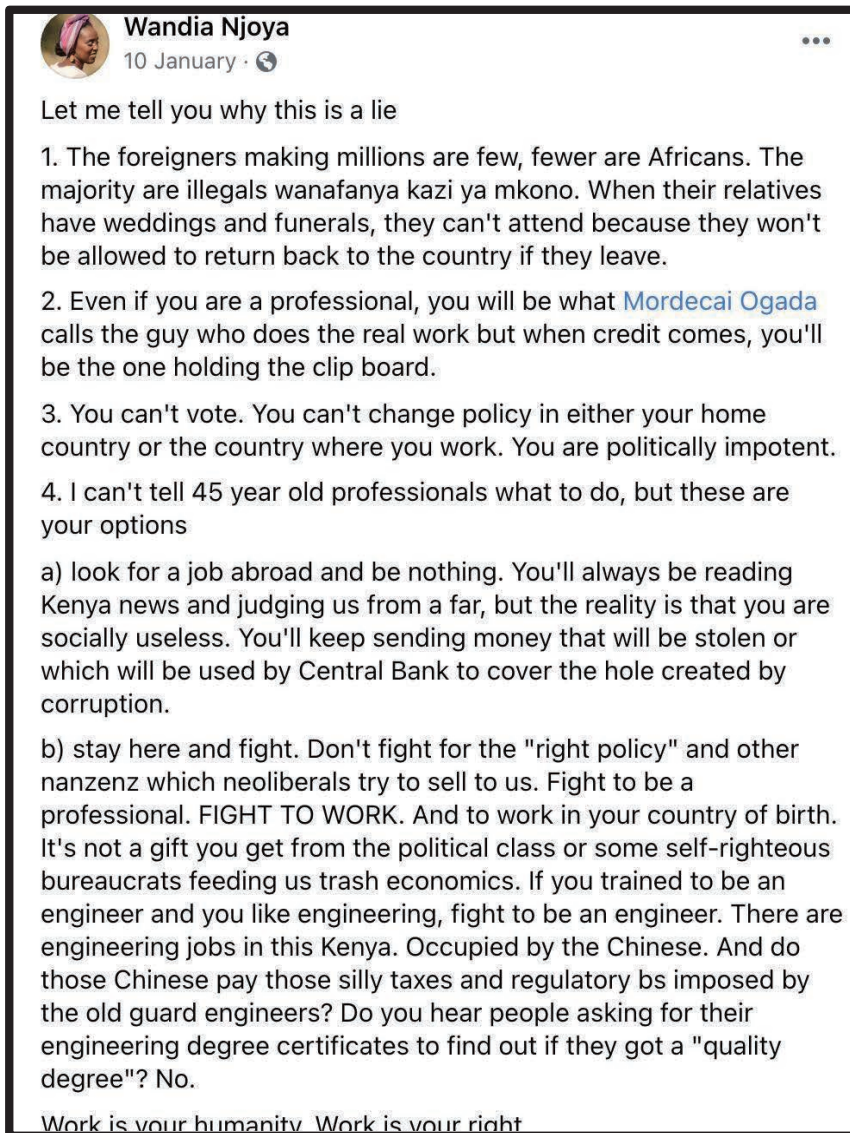
1.0 Introduction

The urge to look for 'greener pastures' is attractive for most young job-seekers in Africa. Those facilitating emigration among the youths often cite fiscal benefits and promise a better life (see picture 1). While Musyoka's views expressed in picture 1, are attractive to the majority frustrated by the poor working conditions at home, there is a unique voice calling for a comprehensive understanding of the 'good work-life'.



Picture 1. A Facebook post encouraging the youth to pursue opportunities abroad¹.

In response to Musyoka's optimistic worldview on work in the diaspora, Wandia Njoya (see picture 2) outlines a more encompassing view of what the young generation can do with their work-life, asking them to view work as 'humane' and a 'right'.



Picture 2. A Facebook post outlining possibilities of a better life at home.

Njoya asks the young population to stay and fight for the right to work at home by confronting neoliberal ideologies that have ruined African economies. She also states that young people have a choice to sojourn abroad, find a 'good' job and be 'nothing', while becoming spectators and

judges of the cruel reality at home and remaining 'socially useless', only to remit money that gets hijacked by the corrupt system at home.

These two worldviews present stark realities depicting dilemmas faced by the African youths today, where an increasing number of qualified young people are faced with a dire lack of job and career opportunities. The purpose of our paper is not to state which of these two worldviews is better. Rather, to highlight the diverse drivers and nuances that facilitate movements by delving into narratives of those youths in motion to unearth what informs their choices, including that of their destinations. We claim that their choices are a creation of the prevailing conditions at home, the engagement or lack thereof by the state, and the forces of globalisation.

The reference to Japan as an 'emerging migration state' is arguably a new idea (Hollifield and Orlando Sharpe 2017). The notions, which have historically depicted Japan as closed to immigrants, have dictated who is included or excluded. Japan has attracted numerous studies focusing on migration due to a decreasing labour force and an ageing population. This focus has historically given preference to migrants from developed countries and those close to Japan, with the most recent policy change in 2018 reaffirming this (Oishi 2020). In this regard, African migrants to Japan are understudied as Africa does not seem to be the source of skilled labour.

Moreover, geographical distance seems to be a deterrent (Schans 2012). Consequently, scholars ignore the agency of African immigrants in Japan. The few that exist focus on negative narratives (Agyeman 2015), which propagate a simplistic caricature of African migrants, thus, reproducing the single narrative of a dark, conflict-ridden people.

Although Japan has a long history as a frontier for Africa in the development field, such as the immediate post-Cold War initiative, Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD) in 1993, both state policies that could have facilitated easy mobility of Africans to Japan and geographical disadvantages have only resulted in few such migrants in Japan. Perhaps due to the uniqueness of African migrants in Japan, this area has been attracting numerous migration studies. Consequently, such

studies primarily focus on exploring African social capital, integration (Agyeman 2015), survival mechanisms (Capobianco 2015), and pathways to incorporate labour relations (Schans 2012). Other topics that have dominated the studies of African migrants in Japan are notions of transnational marriages, Africans as an emerging ex-pat community, and a more complex area, that is, analysing refugee narratives. Studies of African migrants targeted by Japan lack critical analysis of the categories of Africans who qualify to break through the stringent Japanese migration system. One popular thread argues, and rightly so, that the majority of Africans accessing Japan begin as students. Building on such views, we put forward narratives of new categories of young African migrants coming to Japan who do not fit into the conventional categories. We use these narratives to show the relevance of new approaches, especially those focusing on understanding the context of the original countries and the journeys taken by such youths in motion.

2.0 Why and where is the motion?

Political-economic impetus

The East African region provides two contrasting realities and thus, different reasons for the youths in motion. On the one hand, motion is spurred by a political-economic crisis in countries such as Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia, and South-Sudan. On the other hand, some countries have enjoyed relatively stable political environments while recording stagnant or slowly growing economies, as exemplified in Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Burundi, and Rwanda. In the context of political instability, many scholars and commentators cite high rates of unemployment as a primary reason for migration. The question remains: Why has unemployment held steady among the youths even with the numerous initiatives launched to mitigate this challenge? Like many other places in Africa, the youths in Eastern Africa form the majority of the general population. Collaborating with international development partners, most governments in this region have contributed tremendously to providing

access to education. In Kenya, for example, besides the introduction of free primary education in 2003, the state has also done well in providing easy access to secondary schools through the expansion of day secondary schools supported by the constituency development fund (CDF)². Towards the end of 2010, the Mwai Kibaki government-initiated policies that allowed to establish public universities at county levels, resulting in public-funded universities in almost every county (Kithinji 2016). One of the results of these initiatives has been an increase in degrees without work. Furthermore, the government has also put a sizable investment in technical and vocational training institutions (TVET) that have been producing knowledgeable youths with technical skills. Despite such efforts stemming from the state investment in day secondary schools, state-backed local level universities, and technical training institutions, the rate of school-to-work transition has remained disappointingly low. This shrinking job market for relatively well-trained and informed young generations has, at many times, resulted in both risky and planned migration as an option for survival and aspirations.

Coupled with the state-led programmes that have produced semi-skilled and skilled youths, the emergence and dominance of information communication technologies (ICT) in Eastern Africa empowers the young generation to connect and interact with the imagined greener pastures. One notable impact has been on the rise of mobile phone use in both rural and urban spaces of East Africa, which is aiding new channels through social media networks for disseminating information. Although the Internet data rates have remained high in most African states, social media platforms are relatively easy to access through offers provided by telecommunication companies. For instance, the majority of youths seem to use free WhatsApp and Messenger versions widely. Furthermore, when adding credit to their phones, the offers awarded for WhatsApp and Facebook access are attractive in many ways. Through these simplified social media platforms, the youths are engaging with global trends by disseminating issues in political development, social realms, and opportunities. One

notable effect of this technological development is its impact on the nature of potential migrants. In the past, only relatively wealthy, exposed, and socially connected individuals were able to access these opportunities. However, the rise of mobile communication and technological changes allows much poorer individuals to take advantage of the opportunities to travel to wealthy countries. However, where are the loci of this mobility?

The youths produced by state programmes and ICT have coincided with the rise of new destinations for migrants in new frontiers in Asia and the Middle East.

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- ★Id Copies Of Both Parents

No fees or commissions are payable by the applicant before or after the job because the costs are catered for by the employer

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Picture 3. A social media advertisement of job opportunities for Kenyans in the Middle East.

An interesting line of investigation, therefore, seeks to understand the choice of these new destinations by youths. There are at least three reasons in play: First, continuing waves of globalisation have presented numerous not only in Asian and Middle Eastern countries but also in Africa. For example, some of the youths studied in this paper have participated in forthcoming preparation and construction-related work for the World Cup to be held in Qatar in 2022. Similarly, some were a target of the rising demand for domestic workers in countries such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Second, the recruiting agents (see picture 3) have become important actors in the creation, maintenance, and expansion of opportunities. To sustain their means of survival, recruiters also have to continually find people in need of moving to new places, thus, at times seeking to expand territories that receive such youths. Third, the inadequate and unreliable state regulation of this phenomenon is seen as encouraging specialised cartels that work closely with the state. In the absence of state regulation, recruitment agencies are relentlessly manipulating the desperate young population. Unfortunately, even in cases where the state has established some structure, agencies have found loopholes and corrupt means to continue their business. Nevertheless, the state recognizes a few credible agencies that connect young people with legitimate job opportunities. While the three factors discussed above do not normally characterise the push and pull conditions that draw East African youths to Japan, our analysis has revealed that significant similarities exist despite the prevailing image of Japan's tightly controlled and closed migration policies.

3.0 New trends towards East African youths as labour providers in Japan

Japan's engagement with Africa is seen as pacesetting. While most developed nations expressed signs of fatigue with conflict-ravaged and hunger-stricken Africa, Japan held the first TICAD in 1993 to facilitate development strategies with Africa. The TICAD process has remained a significant platform for engagement between Japan and Africa. Select

TICAD initiatives have enabled the mobility of Japanese nationals to Africa and vice-versa for multifaceted purposes. In the 2013 TICAD V declaration, the Japanese government re-emphasised the need and desire to train human resources for Africa through the Africa Business Education Initiative for the youths (commonly known as the ABE Initiative). While previous state initiatives targeted undergraduate students, TICAD V specifically expanded the opportunities for students to join graduate programmes in Japanese universities. However, unlike earlier grants that expanded the capacity for integration into Japanese university systems through linguistic and cultural orientation, the current programmes lack such mechanisms despite attracting a higher number of students.

Most African immigrants access Japan through the noble goal of education (Capobianco 2015); many of them are 16 to 29 years old. Studies have linked this appeal to higher education in foreign countries to different factors (UNESCO-UIS 2012), such as access to education (Mazzarol and Souter 2002), the quality of education (Cubillo, Sanchez and Cervino 2006), employment prospects (Lin 2007), and the desire for qualifications with worldwide recognition (Mpinganjira and Rugimbana 2009).

These drivers apply to East African students as well. The appeal of better education and expanded opportunities in Japan influences mobility. Japan, propelled by globalisation forces and the need to solve its local dwindling population dilemma, is initiating more schemes that encourage 'cross-border higher education', in which people (students, professors, scholars, researchers) and programmes (courses, academic programmes, and their institutions) are interacting more. This growing trend expands the opportunities for more immigrants to access Japan for both short -and long-term intervals.

Africa-Japan relations have been asymmetrical over the years. In this sense, Japan has emphasised the training of human resources in Africa. The irony in such an approach has become more visible as Japan's population diminishes. Despite an ageing population characterised by a low

birth rate, Japan has not committed to exploring opportunities in the African youths. However, the ambiguity in programmes that focus on training explains in part the contribution of the African youths to Japan's labour problem. With Japan's emphasis on private sector engagement in Africa's development in the past decade, the primacy of African human resources with Japanese knowledge has been gaining momentum. In 2019, an Asian Review article announced that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs launched a new education programme for the fiscal year 2020 intended to expand the pool of potential employees for Japanese companies (Kodachi and Jibiki 2019). Students who have studied in Japan have taken advantage of such initiatives, for example, Kakehashi Japan, a network of beneficiaries of ABE initiative grants that aims not only to bridge Japan and Africa but also to provide necessary resources for Japanese investments in Africa. This shows that those who have received training in Japan have the upper hand even once they return to their mother countries. The two cases surveyed in this study attested to the same. Byarugaba, a former employee at the Japanese Embassy in Uganda, confirmed that he was given a job opportunity at the Embassy because of his Japanese educational background. He was a buffer for his Japanese colleagues, and he helped them navigate the cultures of the two nations³. Another Kenyan lady, freshly out of college, found it easy to secure a job interview in a highly contested field of more than 300 applicants because she had training at a Japanese university. She explains that her 'degree from Japan carried more recognition and prestige than her competitors'⁴.

Although most state-backed schemes emphasise that partakers of such grants should aim to become bridges between Japan and Africa, the majority opt to stay in Japan. Staying is challenging for those whose schemes clearly stipulate their commitment to bridging goals. Despite this, students may navigate through this and still secure the 'remain' status. Such a scheme may be as costly as returning and awaiting a new visa status to help start work in Japan. Many students are without residence barriers, and their visa status can be easily changed to facilitate their stay in the country

once they graduate. This approach makes it possible for a high-skilled labour force in major Japanese corporations.

Some have even attained executive positions in these companies.

Students who fail to secure jobs in the skilled-labour market, but still desire to work in Japan, end up working in the semi-skilled industry, one that also efficiently employs undocumented migrants or those who have lost their student status. These jobs fall in commonly-relegated-to foreigner 3K jobs. The 3 Ks are *Kitsui* (hard), *Kitanai* (unclean), and *Kiken* (dangerous). An interesting thread in this line is the emergence of motions that bear the characteristics of youths destined to Middle Eastern states. As we stated earlier, one of the reasons behind such subtle facilitation of movement is the presence of negotiators between those seeking labour and those in search of such opportunities. The historical trends of those migrating to Japan have largely been negotiated through formal channels. Thus, it has been difficult to find agents in advertisement spaces that recruit for Japan, as is the case for Middle Eastern states. However, this does not imply that such schemes are completely absent, as our field informants reveal.

Mirabelle,⁴ a 34-year-old Rwandese lady, started her journey to Japan through the beckoning of her sister who was living and working in the country. Her sister assured her of some form of employment with reasonable monetary benefits sufficient for a decent lifestyle both in Japan and in Rwanda. Mirabelle⁵ was asked to send her documents and 400,000 yen to an agent who had gained a reputation for helping several other Rwandese secure Japanese visas over the years. She waited for an entire year before receiving a call that her visa had been approved and that she could travel to Japan. Under the guise of a workshop participant, Mirabelle entered Japan. The only jobs available to her given her nonresident status are in car yards, farms, manufacturing industries, and so on. Her story resonates with many other East African youths struggling to change their visa status to secure more stable employment or opting for refugee status visas. However, these informal job sectors continuously benefit from

status-less youths such as Mirabelle because they can easily be manipulated for fear of being uncovered. They must make do with low pay and undesirable working conditions. Despite these tough conditions, Mirabelle and the other East Africans she works with are not ready to give up on their Japan dream. Kingston, a 28-yearold Tanzanian, explains that while other African migrants working in the Middle East complain about inhumane treatment by their bosses, Japanese bosses treat them relatively well. He adds, 'We do not even experience the kind of xenophobia and being thrown on the streets you hear about in China'.

The focus on motions facilitated by youths who can attain student status seems somewhat appealing as a tool for providing solutions to labour shortages in Japan. This focus on students must not shield our eyes to the aspirations of the majority of youths who are locked out due to stringent formalities in selection processes and who are endeavouring to access 3K jobs.

4.0 Religious motivation for mobility

Restrained by the 'receiving' mentality with regard to Christian missiology, African Christianity laboured under the shadows of their Western counterparts in a paternalistic relationship in which they only received missionaries. However, the growth and expansion of the Christian church in the global south have changed the narrative of being mere receivers of missionary activities. Furthermore, the dwindling influence of churches in Europe and America has attracted a new debate that emphasises that the church in the global south needs more engagement in the missionary mandate (Kulo 2017). Thus, there has been a gradual growth of churches and spiritual movements in the West, whose roots are in Africa, and these establishments seek to expand their tentacles to Asia. A typical example of this trend is reflected in the efforts of the Kenyan-based church, Nairobi Chapel, whose growth strategy is to plant a church in each major metropolitan city in the world. The list of 'new frontiers' includes Hong Kong, China, India, and Japan. The chapel

actualizes this goal through partnerships with universities and other like-minded organizations, spawning into several East African youth embarking on foreign journeys as missionaries, or missionaries-in-training.

A different strand of missiology that facilitates mobility can be seen in individuals with aspirations to carry with them both an experience of spiritual discovery and a continuation of the religious mandate to proselytise in the new geographical location. In the analysis of the present study probing potential students' expectations of their educational career, several cited extending their faith communities to Japan and other Asian countries and, at the same time, proving that their educational ambitions are strongly intertwined with their spiritualism and the urge to spread it. For example, Masembe, a 27-year-old Ugandan who wants to study global studies in Japan, aspires to 'understand different cultural beliefs because he wishes to be a role model to society so that wherever people see him, they encounter the presence of Christ'.⁵ In her book, Ikeuchi highlights that 'diasporic mobility and religious sensibilities are equal constituents of the ethical self' (2019); thus, the need to recognize the religious impetus to mobility, an acknowledgement that would challenge the stereotype that African migrants are drawn to Japan only for its economic opportunities and technological advances.

5.0 Conclusion

The media narrative of desperate youths seeking opportunities in 'greener pastures' is glaringly skewed and above all, appeals to the need to approach the migration crisis from a human perspective. Such narratives of African migration to Europe have, thus, been associated with human tragedies and contributed to formulating policies that appeal to the rights of those taking unthinkable risks to access better lives. Although this particular use of 'tragedy' is realistic to migrants close to their desired destinations, it does not aptly describe the journey of Africans to the new target destinations that are a subject of our present analysis. In this regard, there is a scarcity of academic and journalistic focus on the prevailing narratives surrounding

those migrating to Japan. Furthermore, the distance between East Africa and Japan as a desired destination does not necessitate a political crisis, which might spin a narrative that demands a policy response. Nevertheless, politicised opinions only serve to exacerbate the misplaced humanitarian responses.

To target a more constructive and pragmatic approach in the management of migrants, it is crucial to critically analyse the context of the origins by asking pertinent questions about why the young generation is in motion, as we have attempted in the present work. Most importantly, a character analysis of their journeys has the potential to reveal crucial areas that policymakers and society need to pay attention to in confronting migrants' issues. Towards this, we see the potential of such exploration as a contribution to this project. For many East African youths, the decision to leave usually intersects with the opportunity to leave. How an individual learns about opportunities in Japan will significantly influence their journey to Japan. A young man who learns about an education scholarship will need to take actions specific to acquiring a student visa. One who hears about an informal working opportunity will most likely need to depend on the agent disseminating such news to secure a visa. These factors, among others, have an illuminating contribution to studies in this field.

Endnotes

¹ Njoya, W. 2021, 'Let me tell you why this is a lie', Facebook post, 10 January, viewed 1 February 2021

<<https://www.facebook.com/100001270512490/posts/3801141959938117/?d=n./accessed 11 March 2021>>

² The act of parliament that introduced CDF to Kenya in 2003 put all MPs at the core of control of all centrally disseminated resources. CDF, therefore, became a critical turning point to the Harambee activity but also deified the position of elected officials as resource-providers. Harambee is a popular nation-building model that focused on pooling resources to build schools, hospitals, and other developmental infrastructure. Typically, such initiatives are championed by

community leaders with financial contributions from regular citizens. The placement of CDF management in the hands of the MPs had various implications. The Kenyan system of governance is based on the Westminster system, which has a special character that involves the MPs with their constituents. The MPs are elected on a platform of popularity that they have created by their engagement with disbursement of development. This 'transformative' agenda stands against the ability to make laws or engage in important national debates

³ Derived from Interview with Byarugaba in September 2019.

⁴ Derived from Interview with Christine in September 2019

⁵ Derived from Interview from Mirabelle on 14 December 2020.

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