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Against the Odds, African Migrants Put Down Roots in South America

Luisa Feline Freier | Tuesday, Dec. 4, 2018

A Senegalese migrant watches for police, who make frequent raids on street vendors, Sao Paulo, Brazil, June 15, 2018 (Photo by Walker Dawson).

SAO PAULO—One day last May, fishermen working off the coast of Maranhao, a state in northwestern Brazil, came to the rescue of a rough-looking catamaran with a busted mast and a nonfunctioning motor. After towing the boat to safety, they realized it was carrying an unlikely group of passengers: 25 men from sub-Saharan Africa who said they'd been at sea for over a month.

The men had boarded the vessel on the other side of the Atlantic, in the island nation of Cape Verde, paying hundreds of dollars apiece for their spots. Some of them later said they could see immediately that the boat was too small, but they decided to get on anyway. Worse still, after the food they brought ran out, the men were forced to make do with a paltry supply of biscuits and whatever fish they could catch. With no cover from the hot sun, some resorted to drinking urine after their water reserves were exhausted.

Somehow, all 25 survived. "After 35 days of journey in these conditions, it is really lucky that nobody died," a Brazilian police official told The Guardian (https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/may/22/african-migrant-brazil-boat-rescue-atlantic-crossing).

Clearly, the trip had not gone according to plan. Yet the destination—a Latin American country some 1,800 miles west of Cape Verde—was no accident. Passenger Talat Shou, a 37-year-old native of Guinea, says he had set his sights on Brazil after hearing horror stories of racist abuse African migrants had endured in Europe. "I don't need no Europe, because I can see what is happening in Europe on the TV every time. The Europeans are very criminal human beings," he told WPR shortly after his rescue. "In Brazil, the people are ready to accept strangers now."

Sure enough, once the men were taken to Sao Luis, the capital of Maranhao state, Brazilian authorities gave them food, medical care and one-year humanitarian visas. Though they are wary of racism and

widespread poverty, most of them are optimistic that they can make lives for themselves in Brazil. "Everybody says there is no job—that in Brazil, you don't have anything," says Jerry Osagie, who is originally from Nigeria. "But I'm very happy here. Because you cannot compare Brazil with any other African country. It's better."

If Osagie were like many of his countrymen, his path would have looked altogether different. Nigerian outmigration, especially in recent years, has typically been bound up with the larger story of African migrants attempting perilous sea voyages to the north, across the Mediterranean. Nigerians were at the center of revelations last year about migrants being auctioned off (http://www.cnn.com/2017/11/14/africa/libya-migrant-auctions/index.html) as slaves in Libya. And networks that take Nigerian women and girls to work as sex workers in Italy and other European countries are well-documented (https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/04/10/the-desperate-journey-of-a-trafficked-girl).

But while images of poor black people trying to reach southern Europe dominate the popular perception of African migration, the reality is that a significant portion of African migration has nothing to do with Europe at all. Over half (http://www.un.org/esa/population/publications/popfacts/popfacts_2012-3_South-South_migration.pdf)—53 percent—of African migrants move within their own continent. Others chase dreams involving life across the Atlantic, in North America. And since the mid-2000s, an increasing (http://www.un.org/esa/population/publications/popfacts/popfacts_2012-3_South-South_migration.pdf) number of African migrants have set their sights on destinations elsewhere, including South America.

These South America-bound migrants have profited, in many cases, from progressive migration policies and relatively welcoming public attitudes toward foreigners. To be sure, these policies weren't necessarily crafted with Africans in mind. But as demonstrated in dozens of interviews I've conducted with African migrants in South America since 2011, they have created space for Africans to form communities in places like Quito, Buenos Aires and other cities. Some members of these communities are more than happy to make South America their new home, while others see the continent as a way station on the road north, to the United States.

Their stories highlight how migrants' trajectories are highly susceptible to changes in rules and regulations. And they demonstrate how the pursuit of even the semblance of opportunity can lead people to destinations about which they know little—and sometimes nothing at all.

Ecuador Opens Its Doors

In the late 2000s, widespread frustration over entrenched poverty, high unemployment and environmental degradation in the oil-rich Niger Delta region of Nigeria led to a sudden, alarming upsurge

in militia violence. The Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta, one of the largest militant groups in the region, increasingly turned to tactics such as kidnapping and guerrilla warfare, targeting security forces and oil executives alike.

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John, a native of the Delta, was in his 20s at the time, a recent graduate of Polytechnic University in Port Harcourt, in Rivers state, where he'd received a bachelor's degree in business administration. While he had hoped to build a life for himself close to home, the region's violence and economic stagnation made this unrealistic. One day, militants came to his hometown firing their weapons, raiding homes and kidnapping the local youth leader. Soon after that, John began plotting his escape.

"When they kidnapped our youth president, everybody started fleeing left and right, because if you stay, they will kidnap you," John, now 34, says. Like many of the other migrants quoted in this piece, John spoke to WPR on the condition that I refer to him using a pseudonym, citing security concerns and the risk of legal repercussions or deportation.

John began searching for a way out of Nigeria in 2008. As luck would have it, that was the same year that Rafael Correa, then the president of Ecuador, initiated a policy of "open doors" that removed all visa requirements to enter the country for people of all nationalities. It was a populist move, designed to draw a contrast with the restrictive migration policies of the United States and many European countries at a time when Ecuadorians were emigrating north in large numbers. It permitted anyone to stay in Ecuador without a pre-arranged visa for a period of 90 days.

Taking advantage of the policy, about 1,000 Nigerians, John among them, would travel to Ecuador during the two-year period in which the policy was in effect, forming part of a broader wave of African migration to South America. Nigerians in Ecuador recall how word of Ecuador's policy spread quickly in their home country after it was announced. "In Nigeria, a lot of people are suffering. They want to get out of the country to look for a job, to work," says Chibola, a 27-year-old Nigerian who now lives in Ecuador. "And when they hear there is one country that is visa-free, that's where they go."

Abeo, another Nigerian, ended up in Ecuador after Europe refused him. In 1999, a land dispute led to his father being murdered by one of his brothers in the family home. Fearing for his life, Abeo fled to Ghana for nine months, then returned to Nigeria to apply for a visa to the Netherlands, only to be rejected. "One

person advised me that if I had to leave Nigeria very quickly, I can come to Ecuador," he says. "So why did I come to Ecuador? It's not that I *like* Ecuador. I came because it's visa-free to Nigerians."

Not all of the recent Nigerian migrants in Ecuador are fleeing troubled lives back home. Ian, the 53-year-old leader of the Nigerian community in Quito, Ecuador's capital, says that even before Correa's open-door policy came into effect, Nigerians were arriving on tourist visas to ferry drugs from South America to Africa; the drugs would then be transported to European markets.

These days, there is a community of about 500 long-term Nigerian immigrants in Quito. Members of this community tend to be highly educated, having left Nigeria with high school and college degrees, and some have been able to find work as English teachers or start businesses of their own. Others have secured the right to stay by marrying Ecuadorian citizens.

Senegalese migrants who traveled from Cape Verde to Brazil get haircuts before being immunized, Sao Luis, Brazil, May 29, 2018 (Photo by Walker Dawson).

For others, getting their papers in order has been a struggle. After the initial 90-day period granted under Correa's open-door policy expired, it was difficult, if not impossible, for many to attain medium- to long-term residency status. Some ended up trying to get asylum. Around 300 Nigerians

(http://popstats.unhcr.org/en/overview) applied for asylum in 2009 and 2010, when the open-door policy was in effect, according to the United Nations refugee agency.

Armed with his testimony about militia violence in the Niger Delta, John was one of only 21 (http://popstats.unhcr.org/en/time_series) who was granted refugee status in 2010. Chibola and Abeo, meanwhile, saw their applications get rejected, and were hiding from the authorities when I met them. Their stories show how, even though South American countries don't have Europe's reputation for being tough on migration, life can be as precarious for those heading south as it is for those heading north.

Tolerant Rhetoric, Racist Reality

Ecuador's open-door policy was rooted in liberal discourses on migration that have been prevalent throughout the region and translated into new immigration laws and policies in many countries. The right to migrate is now enshrined in Argentinian, Bolivian, Ecuadorian and Uruguayan law and in various regional declarations. Ecuador's 2008 constitution champions the concept of "Universal Citizenship," which it defines as "the free mobility of all inhabitants of the planet and the progressive end of the status of foreigner as a transforming element of unequal relations between countries, especially North-South."

In the area of refugee policy, almost all Central and South American countries have reformed their laws to incorporate the broader Cartagena Declaration on Refugees, which was formulated in 1984 in response to the mass displacement of Central Americans in the early 1980s. Officials at the time concluded that the terms governing refugee eligibility as defined by the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees—which linked eligibility to a "well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion"—were insufficient. They opted to extend eligibility to people fleeing generalized violence, foreign aggression, internal armed conflict, mass human rights violations and other circumstances that "have seriously disturbed public order."

Yet Latin American governments did not expect their policies to attract migrants from Africa and other parts of the Global South. To the extent that governments looked beyond Latin America at all, they have historically promoted immigration from Europe. In the case of Argentina, this is plainly stated in its constitution, Article 25 of which stipulates that "[t]he Federal Government shall encourage European immigration."

Once the numbers of African, Asian and Caribbean immigrants started to increase (https://sas-space.sas.ac.uk/6149/) in the mid-2000s, there was widespread public concern. In 2010, at a conference convened in Washington by the Organization of American States, officials from seven Latin American countries expressed alarm about African migration that was "new and growing," driven mainly by economic migrants and some refugees in need of protection.

Many came to see new arrivals from Africa as problematic because they are largely undocumented and thus difficult to control. (In contrast, migrants from within Latin America often don't need visas and have ample possibilities to apply for temporary and permanent residence status based on regional integration schemes like Mercosur and the Andean Community.) Whether fairly or not, African migrants are commonly perceived as posing an added security risk because of their supposed links to criminal smuggling and trafficking networks. It is also no secret that racial and ethnic discrimination remains a contentious issue across Latin America, and that Asian and African immigrants and immigrants of color have historically (http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674729049) been the most discriminated against in the region.

Additionally, Latin American governments are aware that significant increases in migration from other parts of the world can complicate their relationships with Washington because an important share of African migrants continue their journeys to Canada and the United States. They also know how challenging it is to establish bilateral repatriation agreements for unauthorized migrants with African countries of origin and transit countries, given the poor diplomatic representation of Latin American countries in Africa, and vice versa.

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The regional backlash against African migration had a direct effect on Ecuador's open-door policy, which ran into both domestic and international opposition. Correa's political opponents and the media, as well as political allies within his administration, linked the increasing numbers of African immigrants to security issues. Internationally, countries including the United States exerted pressure on Ecuador to reinstate visas (http://etheses.lse.ac.uk/3455/) in order to prevent the onward migration of African, Asian and Caribbean migrants toward the U.S.

This pressure prompted Correa to jettison the open-door policy for 12 African, Asian and Caribbean countries, leading to a sharp drop in arrivals. Those Africans who remain describe an array of daily challenges.

John, the Nigerian who was granted refugee status in Ecuador, says he has felt excluded and discriminated against in Quito. Ecuadorians often ignore him when he approaches them for help, using the fact that he speaks limited Spanish against him. He says this is a far cry from the more accommodating manner Nigerians have of dealing with foreigners.

Others similarly complain of an array of examples of everyday racism: Taxis don't stop for them, or people move to the other side of the road when they approach. Patrick, a Cameroonian living in Ecuador, says discrimination is constant—"first because you are black, second because you are a foreigner."

John says that, everywhere he goes, ignorance of Africa is widespread. "One person asked me, 'Is it true that Africans are sleeping on top of trees?' That's what they ask—I mean it!" he recalls with disbelief. "My country is better than Ecuador. My country is more developed than Ecuador. But most of them don't know because they are primitive. They are not going on the internet. They are not reading the newspaper. In fact, they don't want to know."

Latin America's 'Petit Dakar'

It is difficult to estimate the number of African migrants currently in Latin America, as many migrants move through the region without proper documentation. Yet data on asylum applications point to broad trends.

In 2010, the U.N. refugee agency recorded only 1,074 pending asylum claims by African nationals across Latin America, 123 of them in Brazil. In 2017, the number was 31,075, with an overwhelming majority—29,095—in Brazil. The main countries of origin (http://popstats.unhcr.org/en/overview) of African asylum applicants in Brazil have been Angola, Ghana, Senegal and Nigeria.

These numbers are obviously a far cry from the totals reported by the European Union and the United States. Last year, Europe received 168,000 asylum applicants from sub-Saharan Africa alone. Yet once migration patterns become well-established, they can skyrocket quickly. After all, the number of African asylum-seekers in southern European countries was similarly small (http://popstats.unhcr.org/en/overview) just three decades ago. Until the late 1970s, overall asylum claims in Europe hovered around 20,000 per year. And in the 1980s, when asylum claims increased from about 150,000 to 500,000, only around 10 percent (https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01419870.2017.1355975) of asylum-seekers in Europe were Africans.

Not all countries in Latin America that have received a significant influx of African migrants have turned on them as Ecuador did. Argentina, for example, has been a destination for Senegalese migrants for well over a decade. While a few have arrived via plane with valid tourist visas and then overstayed, the vast majority have entered the country without authorization, traveling overland from Brazil.

Brazilian President-elect Jair Bolsonaro arrives to attend meetings related to the transition of power, Brasilia, Brazil, Nov. 13, 2018 (AP photo by Eraldo Peres).

Today, experts believe more than 10,000 Senegalese live in greater Buenos Aires alone. One neighborhood, Once, is now commonly referred to as "Le Petit Dakar." The Senegalese in Argentina are mainly economic migrants—men between the ages of 20 and 40 who traveled by themselves. The majority work as street vendors, selling trinkets and cheap jewelry in Buenos Aires and sending remittances back home.

Once Senegalese immigrants arrive in Argentina, legalizing their status via traditional means is virtually impossible. For some, filing asylum claims has been a strategy for obtaining a provisional residence certificate, which entitles the asylum-seeker to work and move within the country. But this is not a permanent fix.

Argentine officials, though, have tried to accommodate at least some of the African population. In 2013, Argentina implemented a special amnesty that benefited 1,700 Senegalese immigrants. Politicians have also sounded a tolerant note when addressing the migration question. "I do not want to resemble countries that expel people and let children die on beaches. That's not Christian, it's cultural decadence," Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner, then Argentina's president, said (https://www.minutouno.com/notas/1289784-cristina-

kirchner-no-quiero-parecerme-los-paises-que-dejan-morir-chicos-las-playas) in 2015. "Immigrants are thrown out like lumps. I do not want be like those who let people die in the lower decks of ships, those who create walls... [That] only is the degradation of the human condition."

As unauthorized Senegalese immigrants have continued to arrive in Argentina, migrants' rights organizations and the public protector have pressured the government to consider another special legalization program, though it has never been implemented.

Senegalese migrants describe Argentina as a peaceful place where they can generally live unbothered. "The Argentines, the majority are good, they like to chat," one Senegalese man says. "There is cultural exchange. Sometimes there are people who are crazy who do not speak to you. But I think it's because they are of a culture different from ours. They do not understand our language, so then they will fear us because of that. It's not that they are bad people."

Chasing the American Dream

For many African migrants arriving in South America, the continent is merely another stop in a longer journey to reach the United States. While conducting research in a migrant detention center in Mexico City in 2012, I met Frank, a 27-year-old native of Cameroon. Frank told me he had been forced to leave Cameroon in 2007 because of a violent family feud over farmland. He first crossed his country's southern border to reach Equatorial Guinea. He then boarded a cargo ship as a stowaway, without knowing where exactly it would take him. Three weeks later, he arrived in Chile.

Frank stayed in Chile for a couple of days and then crossed the border into Argentina. He lived in Argentina for two years, working in a factory that manufactures spoons and playing in a local soccer club. All the while, he was thinking about how he might make it to the United States.

Once he had saved enough money, Frank traveled through Brazil to Venezuela, where he stayed for one year and applied for refugee status in order to legalize his status. His application was denied. He continued his journey via bus through Colombia. During one stretch in the rainforest of Darien, Colombia, Frank and the three Cubans and two other Cameroonians he was walking with went six days without eating. They were picked up by Panamanian officials and treated in a hospital.

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After they recovered, Frank and his travel companions received official exit permits from the Panamanian authorities and resumed their journey north. Eventually, Frank crossed into Mexico—one country shy of his ultimate goal—only to be detained by officials in Tapachula, on Mexico's Pacific coast near the Guatemalan border.

The journey was a remarkable feat. Frank had traversed the Atlantic and nearly all of the Americas without any legal documentation, paying smugglers in each country to get past the next border crossing—services that he said set him back over $4,000.

Although African migration through Mexico toward the United States is small, especially compared to migrants coming from Central American countries, the number of Africans making similar journeys is increasing. According to the Mexican Migration Institutes, a government body based in Mexico City, there were 171 Africans detained in the country in 2004, 1,282 in 2010 and 2,070 from January to September of this year.

Most African migrants detained by Mexican authorities are given 20 days to regularize their status or to leave the country. The documentation they receive allows them, in many cases, to continue crossing Mexican territory until they reach the United States to file asylum claims.

Changing Political Winds

Migration pressures out of Africa are likely to persist or even increase in the coming decades. As factors such as political instability and a lack of economic opportunity push more people to leave the continent, existing communities of African migrants in places like Quito and Buenos Aires will welcome new members.

For those Africans who make the journey to South America, the continent represents hope. That helps explain why the 25 African men agreed to board the catamaran in Cape Verde and cross the Atlantic, even though the vessel did not necessarily look up to the voyage. And it also helps explain why, despite the trauma of that journey, many were ultimately happy with their decision.

Yet Brazil is a poignant example of how the political winds can shift to migrants' disadvantage. The election in October of the far-right Jair Bolsonaro as the country's next president can hardly be taken as a good sign. Bolsonaro has a track record of openly racist views. In 2015 he complained that "the scum of the earth is showing up in Brazil," a reference to African asylum-seekers.

Though Bolsonaro has recently promised not to send Venezuelan refugees back home, he is considering constructing refugee camps. It is likely that he will try to curb Venezuelan arrivals going forward, and that he will also try to crack down on African arrivals.

For now, that is of little concern to Paul, one of the survivors of the catamaran journey who remains optimistic about his new home. “Who am I? I’m somebody. I’m planning for my future. And I believe that future will be bright here,” he told WPR in May. “That’s why I’m here. And I can see the future coming. I want to build my future. That’s all.”

—Walker Dawson contributed reporting from Sao Paulo and Sao Luis, Brazil

—Bernarda Zubrzycki contributed reporting from Buenos Aires

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