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“JAPA” SYNDROME IN NAOMI’S FLIGHT TO MOAB AND LESSONS FOR THE NIGERIAN SOCIETY

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Abstract

Nigerian society is experiencing a great wave in the migration of people, which does not only include the younger generation but also the older generation. The populace of Nigerian society is tired of the socio-politico-economic maladies permeating the lives and culture of the people. “Japa” is an emerging jargon that has gradually replaced the term migration in 21st-century Nigerian society. Migration means the movement of people, goods and services from one place to another. However, “Japa” is a peculiar term associated with describing people who are travelling outside of the country for the purpose of greener pastures. Thus, it suffices to say that people in the biblical era moved from one place to another in search of greener pastures, such as Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Naomi, amongst others. Therefore, this paper examined the concept of “Japa” in Naomi’s flight to Moab and lessons for Nigerian society. The study employed historical and descriptive methods. It was discovered that Naomi’s flight to Moab had a lot of effects such as economic, psychological, religious and social effects. The study also derived lessons that can be learnt towards the attitude of Japaism among the Nigerian populace today. Hence, the study recommended that the populace of the Nigerian society should, above all considerations, seek God in their act of migration, obey His instructions and trust in His providence and power to turn a calamitous situation into a favourable one.

Keywords: *Japa*, Naomi’s flight, Moab, Nigerian Society

Introduction

The rate of migration within and outside Nigeria is alarming. The thought of every human is to provide the basic needs such as food, clothing and shelter. The inability to provide these basic needs has made an average Nigerian to be on the run regularly in search of a greener pasture. Migration is habitual and constant in a man’s day-to-day activities in the society he resides in the bid to provide for family, and for himself. The concept of migration which connotes movement from one place to another has been classified under “immigration” which means to “move in or arrive” and “emigration” meaning “to exit or leave”. The movement of people is usually necessitated as a result of several reasons such as economic, social, tourism, job hunting and a better life. According to Ezeh (2023) migration is observed as the avenue through which one can improve one’s income, educational opportunities and the prospects of future generation. It has become a reality rather than illusionary that people’s mobility is at the core of human life.

Migration is the divine and man’s intervention to socio-economic, religious, political and environmental hazards. The world continues to grow in knowledge, and desire, with chaotic experiences that has shaped and reshaped man’s attitude to problem-solving and the ultimate attitude to migration in the bid to seeking solace. The biblical narratives show that migration was both divine and man-made efforts. Abraham’s call (Gen 12:1) depicted a moment of a divine effort to migration as the situation was not for the purpose of famine or

natural hazard but a prototype of God's choice for mankind, and the Israelites nation, therefore, bringing about the fulfillment of God's promises to humanity. The other aspect of migration within Abrahamic studies was the voluntary movement of Abraham and his wife to Egypt due to famine (Gen. 12:10-11).

There are two primary reasons for the out-migration of the Israelites in the biblical narratives. Migration in the biblical narratives is about enabling human beings, particularly God's people, to find a home. Apart from the interest of settlement or abode, Israelites also faced displacement as a result of their sin (Rupen, 2020). Harvey (2014) notes that the migration of the patriarchs, starting with Abraham, solidifies the theme of migration in the biblical story. Walls (2008) states that the book of Genesis might as well be called "Migrations". The Book of Genesis gave the origin of migration of the children of Israel and the subsequent books showcased how Israelites continue to move in a circular order from a divine shift to man-made efforts.

The book of Ruth gave another important episode in the history of Israelites and particularly, the act of migration in the Old Testament. Women were not mostly regarded in the ancient Israelite community. They were often regarded as men's subordinates, home material, and insignificant personae. Tischler (1993) proposes that the author of the book of Ruth was a woman because the language indicates a concern for women. Ruth's portrayal of migration finds expression in a Jewish woman, Naomi, who lost everything (husband and sons) in the land of Moab after her migration from Bethlehem.

In the 21st century Nigerian society, migration has often been replaced with the Yoruba calligraphy termed *Japa*. "*Japa*" is not a term that connotes negativity as it simply means to depart from a place. However, it has become popular in the 21st century to denote a mass exodus with the aim of searching for a better life. Is it correct to say that the act of "*japaism*" is ungodly or bad? What were the reasons for Naomi's migration? Was Naomi's migration justified? The paper examined the questions above under the following subheadings: assessing the term "*Japa*": Its origin and usage in the Nigerian context, Naomi in the book of Ruth, socio-politico-religious situations during the time of Naomi, lessons for the Nigerian society, and conclusion.

Assessing the Term "*Japa*": Its origin and usage in the Nigerian context

The concept of migration popularly known as *Japa* is not a new phenomenon in the 21st century Nigerian society. It has been tagged to denote mass exodus of people from a particular country into another one with a more promising future. The term *Japa* is conjured from the Yoruba words, *Ja* which means to "run, flee, loose, break from" and *Pa* meaning entirely, totally, completely, and without skepticism". The term *Japa*, thus connotes the idea to "runaway totally", "loose from a predicament", and "flee totally" from a particular place that is not perceived to be fruitful, and promising, to a place where the future is a golden opportunity of the present. A renowned Professor of History, Professor Toyin Falola affirmed that *Japa* is a Yoruba word that means to flee, and once achieved, a celebration comes with it as it feels more like gaining freedom at last (Premium Times, 2022). This further attests that the *Japa* is a novel within the Nigerian society to denote an attitude of breakthrough, and liberation from economic downturn, political upheavals, insecurity, and hardship that have besieged the society as a whole.

The conception behind *Japa* has always been that of positive attitude, warm receptive and a moment of joy to the *Japaist* and the family as they look forward to seeing

the *Japaist* flourishing in few years to come. This, however, has contributed to the outburst, and the seemingly uncontrollable mass exodus of the population which comprises the youth as the largest percentage and the adult of older category. Olaniji (2021) commented that the British statistic shows that about 14,000 visas (study and work) were issued to Nigerian nationals in 2019 and that by 2021 number has increased about 56,000.

The current net of Nigeria migration rate is -0.273 per 1000 population, indicating that more people are emigrating from the country. It's depressing that Nigeria is currently sinking deep in brain drain, and it probably needs a call for emergency (Punch, 2023). According to Sahara Reporters (2023) the United Kingdom Government has started considering closing temporary visa schemes for care workers as the country recorded the highest numbers of migrants in the last nine months. It further states that the Home Office, the UK's migration department, on Thursday, November 25 (2023), noted that 143,990 health and care worker visas were granted in the year ending September 2023 which is more than double the 61,274 for the year to September 2022.

The outmigration of the Nigerian populace, especially the Youths came in as a result of several reasons. One of the major reasons for *Japaism* in Nigerian ties to the economic imbalance and hardship faced by the people. Fidelis (2022), as cited by Olaniji (2021), affirms that there has been an increase in the migration of youth to convenient countries geometrically and that this action happened because of poor working and unfriendly economic realities in Nigeria.

According to Okunade and Awosusi (2023), there are several factors, such as internal and external factors, that have contributed to this trend. The recent EndSars national youth protests of October 2021, and the irreversible incidence of the Toll Gate Massacre have been argued to have influenced the massive outmigration of Nigerians. It can also be said that Nigerian Youths glorify the educational system of the United States and other overseas countries. This act owes to the premise that overseas certificates are much more valued in Nigerian society, and the employability tendency that accompanies this educational achievement has undervalued the Nigerian educational system.

It is pertinent to say that, *Japa* in the contemporary Nigerian society is a term for liberation, upliftment, breakthrough, and astounding success among the Nigerian youths, and the society at large. It thus, paved way for constant competition, and the ever-increasing figures of the *Japaists* in the Nigerian society. This act has left behind a scar has many Nigerians who were opportune to migrate abroad have failed to contribute meaningfully to their home country.

Naomi in the Book of Ruth

The story narrated in the book of Ruth is a masterpiece even if it is veiled. The narrator has created a master work that can easily miss the ordinary eye (Aidoo, 2022). The book of Ruth comprises four (4) chapters which spread across important themes such as the importance of God in man's daily activities that portrayed the life and journey of Naomi and her family. Adioo (2022) went further to affirm that the events of the story took place around the time of the judges to highlight the trajectory, and significance of being a gem in the midst of wayward people. It opens with the family of a man named Elimelech. Ruth 1:1-3 (KJV) writes:

In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land. So a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in

the country of Moab. The man's name was Elimelech, his wife's name was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to Moab and lived there.

The chapter opens with a predicament which is generic to the land of Judah. Elimelech was introduced to the biblical audience with his wife and children in the first three verses of Ruth. The biblical account succinctly gave the end of Elimelech and his two sons, Malon and Chilion—to die while they sojourned in the land of Moab. Naomi lost her family at Moab (Ruth 1:5).

Naomi is featured prominently in the Hebrew Bible, and in her stories, she is portrayed as a woman who both challenges and conforms to patriarchal expectations. Over the course of her stories, she has a complicated relationship with God, sometimes blaming God for her issues or concluding that God has forsaken her (Trible, 1999). Ruth's portrayal of Naomi indicates a cordial relationship between Ruth and her mother-in-law and further attests to the display of faith by Ruth, which is contrasted with the apostasy of Israel (Towns, 1996).

Naomi was in pain after the demise of her husband and children but Orpah and Ruth were seen as consolers who aimed to relieve her pain. Naomi's lovely daughters-in-law decided to follow her back to Bethlehem but she did not agree with them, and appeal with them to return to their people (Ruth 1:11-15). The name Naomi means "Pleasant" but after the precarious situation, Naomi plea for a change of name to "Mara" meaning "bitter", "for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went out full, and the Lord has brought me home again empty" (Ruth 1:20-21). According to Adioo (2022), to Naomi, God is the one who has brought calamity upon her even though she is coming to Bethlehem upon God's visitation.

The life of Naomi eventually became meaningful when she was engaged with Boaz. Hitherto, Naomi had a kinsman of her husband's, a mighty man of wealth, of the family of Elimelech; and his name was Boaz (Ruth 2:1). However, the relationship between Naomi and Boaz has not been fully reinstated yet until when Ruth came into the limelight of Boaz and the subsequent seduction teaching by Naomi (Ruth 3:3). Ruth and Boaz later got married and their marriage became a blessing to the life of Naomi. Naomi, who had become Mara, was Naomi again. Perhaps because of all the worship of God surrounding the birth of the son, the child was named Obed which means "worshiped" (Towns, 1996).

Socio-Politico-Religious Situations during the Time of Naomi

The major reason for Naomi's flight was the famine in the land of Bethlehem (Ruth 1:1). Hocking (n.d.) opines:

The reference in the opening sentence of the Book to famine in the land is itself suggestive of the degenerate state of the chosen people. In their case, famine was not a mere physical contingency, but a mark of divine displeasure. The land which Jehovah had bestowed upon the children of Israel was a land that flows with milk and honey"—milk from well-fed flocks and herds, and honey from luxuriant vegetation. A threat of starvation in such a fertile land implied that the chastisement of God had fallen upon the tribes because they had neglected His worship and transgressed His laws.

From the above excerpt, famine was seen as the primary reason for Naomi's flight. Famine was one of the causes of migration during the patriarchal age. Abraham after settling

in Canaan left the land to Egypt (Gen. 12:9-10), Isaac fled to the land of Philistines (Gen. 26), and Jacob moved his entire family to the land of Egypt (Gen. 41). This indicates a common reason in the patriarchal era where decisions of migration were made based on existing predicaments of the people.

Famine in the biblical times is usually tied to sin and God's wrath upon the people due to disobedience. Hocking (n.d.) opines that famine depicted a degenerated state which comes as a result of the disobedience of Israelites to God. This was a time when the people of Israel had abandoned God's ways and fallen into idolatry, horrific social conditions, and a disastrous civil war, as told in the chapters of Judges immediately preceding the Book of Ruth in Christian Bibles (*Theology of Work*, n.d.).

The book of Ruth was believed to have been written during the era of the Judges. This period was characterized by the rise and fall of a nation, who was constantly enslaved as a result of sin, and was at other times liberated by the charismatic leaders called –the Judges. Adioo (2022) asserted that the book of Ruth was considered an appendix to the book of Judges, and so it was not given a title of its own in the earlier Septuagint. Cooke (1962) as cited by Adioo (2022) that Josephus, a first-century Jewish historian, states that Ruth was put at the end of Judges to ensure continuity, and that Judges and Ruth were actually together in a single book.

According to Loken (2008) the city of Bethlehem is portrayed in a very negative light. First, during the time of Ibzan who judged Israel for seven years, he brought about intermarriage with other nations as against Mosaic laws (Judg. 12:8-10). Another account in Judg. 17-18 recorded a young Levite living in Bethlehem who was a private minister under Micah to minister before his gods. Thus, Idolatry was prominent during this period. The narration of the woman in Judges 19:1 who died unjustly as a result of being given out to the mob also showcased the situation in the land of Bethlehem (Loken, 2008). Therefore, it is safe to say that the socio-politico-religious situations of the people of Israel during the time of Naomi was characterized by famine, wars, clashes, idolatry, unfaithfulness, and inconsistencies among others which had permeated the Israelites space.

Lessons for the Nigerian Society

1. Seek the Face of God: God is the ultimate Being who knows all things and directs the path of a man to fruition. The family of Naomi became shattered as a result of the error made in their choice to relocate to the land of Moab. Elimelech did not seek the face of God before moving his family, and this cost him his life. It is noteworthy to say that seeking the face of God is necessary in all man's endeavours. Ayokunle (2023) asserts that Africans are spiritually conscious people, and to them, the spiritual and material world forms a continuum that is not necessarily separable. He further buttressed that it is, therefore, wisdom on our part, as humans, to consult with God before taking any action, more so, a major one as relocating to an unknown land. The Nigerian society must come to the realization that God is the first in every decision, and before a decision can be made, Christians and Nigerian leaders must seek the face of God.

2. A Point of Regret

Naomi admitted that she has wrong God for not seeking Him before embarking on the journey. Naomi states:

And she said unto them, Call me not Naomi, call me Mara: for the Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me. I went out full and the Lord hath brought me home again empty: why then call ye me Naomi, seeing the Lord hath testified against me, and the Almighty hath afflicted me? (Ruth 1:19, KJV).

According to Towns (1996) the above statement reflects an inner attitude and suggests she had come to place where she recognized the wrongness of her prior decisions and actions, but had not yet come to the place where she was ready to repent of that sin. But for the sake of an ignored, perhaps even despised young widow from Moab, Naomi would have no part in the blessing of God. Whenever a man takes a decision outside God, such an individual is open to danger and, thus, filled with regret over the wrong choice made.

3. An Establishment of a Viable Relationship

One of the important lesson for Christian and the Nigerian society at large is the essence of creating a viable relationship. Relationship goes a long way to make a man strong and a nation even stronger. Ruth created a viable relationship with Naomi. She said:

...Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God: Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: the Lord do so to me, and more also, if ought but death part thee and me (Ruth 1:16-17).

The aforementioned showcased how the ever-unending relationship was established between the two enemies' countries –Israel and Moab, thus, bringing a link to Messianic fulfillment and the lineage of Jesus Christ. Christians must be aware of the importance of relationship, especially relationship between man and God and between man and other fellow man regardless their religious beliefs, professions and ideologies. The Nigerian society should adopt a diplomatic relationship with other countries in order to ensure development in socio-economic domains and peace in the society.

4. Industrious

Ruth's ability to cope with the situation of things after returning with her mother-in-law is highly commendable. As a stranger in the land of Israel, she was industrious and this greatly paved way for her in the subsequent chapters. Ruth brought the idea of visiting the field to glean left over produce (Ruth 2:2). Boaz's testimony and observation shows that Ruth has been diligence, hardworking and reliable, thus, he commended her efforts and blessed her. Nigerians should be industrious in all they do and give no room for laziness. It is a call for industriousness to individuals and society in general.

5. Restoration

God restored to Naomi all that she lost through Ruth and Boaz. The first son of Ruth and Boaz, Obed, was dedicated to Naomi which brings her joy. The women of the city say that "and he shall be unto thee a restorer of thy life, and a nourisher of thine old age: for thy daughter-in-law, which loveth thee, which is better to thee than seven sons, hath born him. And Naomi took the child, and laid it in her bosom, and became nurse unto it (Ruth 4:15-16)". It is pertinent to say that Ruth also found a new husband after the years of widowhood. The Nigerian society must be aware that God alone can restore the situation of things regardless how bad it may seem to be.

Conclusion

The ideology of *Japa* is not necessarily evil, or bad. But, it must be stated that, regardless of the migration for better life, the home should still be remembered. *Japa* has been narrowed to the migrants who left their domiciles to abroad for the purpose of study, business, and greener pastures. From time immemorial, man has been on the move, going from places to places based on self-discretion, and/or divine order. Abraham's obedience to migrate from his household was a divine command rather than self-will. The early Israelites' community can be referred to as "moving Israelites", this is because they are always on the move from one place to another. The Nigerian society is filled with the fastest growing ideology that "there cannot be development or positive change" in Nigeria. Due to this preconceived notion and others, many have migrated abroad to seek improvement on their lives.

The family of Elimelech experienced the famine period in Bethlehem of Judah, and decided to move his entire family to the land of Moab. Elimelech lost his life and his children, Malon and Chilion in the land of Moab. Naomi became the only survivor of the family of Elimelech who moved into the land of Moab as a result of famine. Naomi was grieved about the whole situation, and regretted the choice of her family's movement from the land of Canaan. However, she lost a husband and two sons, but she gained a daughter, in-law, and companion in Ruth. Ruth became the channel that was used by God to bring restoration, and happiness to the life of Naomi. It must be stated that Ruth's decision to follow Naomi and her belief in the God of Israel marks a sharp contrast in the faith of Naomi, and her family who had initially left her homeland.

Recommendations

1. The Nigerian society should above all considerations seek God in their act of migration, obey His instructions and trusting in His providence and power to turnover a calamitous situation into a favourable one.
2. Relationship is very important. Thus, the Nigerian society must engage in diplomatic relationship with other countries that can be of benefit to the society.
3. Hope should be the first, and the last in every man's thought. Nigerians should not give up on Nigeria. They should always hope and take steps to improve the society.
4. Migration is not wholly bad, if it is taken in direction of God. However, Nigerians abroad, and those planning to evict the country should always think of returning to better the society.

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