

“Japa” Syndrome in Nigeria: The Theatre Intervention

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Abstract

The term “Japa,” a Yoruba slang meaning migration or leaving one’s country in search of greener pastures, has become a rapidly growing phenomenon among Nigerian youths and middle-aged individuals. In contemporary Nigeria, migration functions as a coping strategy for the effects of bad governance, political instability, economic hardship, and unemployment. This paper investigates the underlying factors motivating the Japa syndrome and evaluates the effectiveness of theatre as a tool for educating and enlightening the populace on its implications. Theatre, as an intervention platform, exposes audiences to the consequences of unplanned migration, thereby helping to curb the rising trend of young people embarking on dangerous journeys due to persuasive influences and limited awareness of the risks involved. The study adopts a qualitative research methodology, drawing on primary and secondary data. Questionnaires, play productions, and post-performance discussions served as interactive platforms to sensitise the public to the complexities surrounding Japa migration. Anchored on Jean-Paul Sartre’s existentialist theory, the findings reveal that theatre, through its multidimensional appeal to sight, emotion, and psychology, serves as a powerful tool for raising awareness, engaging youths, influencing attitudes, and encouraging critical reflection. The study concludes that theatre is an effective medium for reshaping perceptions and reducing uninformed migration by fostering informed decision-making among young Nigerians.

Keywords: Japa, Syndrome, Youth, Theatre, Intervention

Introduction

Youth migration, popularly referred to in Nigeria as the “Japa Syndrome,” has evolved into a significant socio-cultural and developmental concern in recent years. The term “Japa” originates from the Yoruba language, one of the major indigenous languages spoken in southwestern Nigeria. It is derived from two syllables—*ja* meaning “to break” and *pa* meaning “to go away”—which together signify “to break away” or “to escape.” Although initially used informally and humorously to describe creative ways of fleeing difficult circumstances, the word became widely popular after the release of Naira Marley’s 2020 song titled *Japa*. Since then, it has transcended its slang origins to become a commonly used expression across all social groups in Nigeria and within the Nigerian diaspora. Today, “Japa” features prominently in musical expressions, films, theatre, social media discourse, and everyday linguistic interactions (Okunade & Awosusi, 1).

The widespread adoption of the term reflects a deeper and more troubling national reality: the accelerating rate at which young Nigerians are leaving the country in search of better prospects abroad. The Japa movement is largely driven by persistent socio-economic challenges, including rising unemployment, inadequate educational and professional opportunities, insecurity, economic instability, and widespread dissatisfaction with governance. For many youths, migration has become synonymous with hope, survival, and the pursuit of a more stable and dignified life. However, the mass departure of skilled, talented, and energetic young people poses significant threats to Nigeria’s human capital base, undermining national productivity, innovation, and long-term development. As more individuals seek opportunities abroad, the country grapples with a diminishing workforce and the growing concern of “brain drain,” further constraining socio-economic progress.

Against this backdrop, theatre emerges as a powerful and versatile tool for intervention. Historically, theatre in Africa has served not only as entertainment but also as a medium for education, sensitisation, and community engagement. Its ability to capture lived experiences, provoke critical thinking, and stimulate emotional resonance positions it as an effective platform for addressing social issues such as youth migration. Through storytelling, dramatization, participatory performances, and post-performance discussions, theatre creates spaces for reflection, dialogue, and behavioural change. In the context of the Japa Syndrome, theatre can illuminate the socio-economic factors influencing migration, demystify the often romanticised idea of life abroad, caution youths about the risks of irregular migration, and inspire constructive alternatives within the local environment.

This study therefore, investigates the role of theatre as an intervention mechanism in responding to the Japa phenomenon. By examining how theatrical productions, questionnaires, and audience-engagement sessions raise awareness about the implications and complexities of youth migration, the research highlights the transformative potential of creative approaches in promoting national

development. Anchored on Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist theory—which emphasises individual freedom, choice, and responsibility—the study interrogates how theatre can empower youths to reflect critically on their decisions, reassess their motivations for migration, and envision viable pathways within Nigeria. Ultimately, the research demonstrates that theatre functions not only as a mirror of societal realities but also as a catalyst for attitudinal change, offering a meaningful avenue for mitigating uninformed migration and fostering sustainable youth development.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this research work was based on Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist philosophy. Sarte was a French philosopher who propagated the existentialism theory; which was built on the tripod of personal freedom, individual responsibility and deliberate choice, which he claimed were determined by how people viewed life. As an influential philosophy, existentialism emphasised the importance of individual freedom and taking responsibility as well as the role of choice and action in shaping one's life and creating identity.(Reynolds and Renaudie 54)

Conceptual Review

The Japa Syndrome:-The Japa Syndrome is a term coined in Nigeria to describe the phenomenon of Nigerian youth seeking opportunities abroad, particularly in developed countries, and choosing to leave their home country permanently or for an extended period. The term "Japa" is derived from the Nigerian Yoruba language, meaning "to escape" or "to run away." The Japa Syndrome reflects the aspirations of young Nigerians to pursue better prospects outside the country due to factors such as limited opportunities, unemployment, political instability, and the desire for higher standards of living (Waeze1-3). Japa is a Yoruba locution which means to leave for greener pastures. This phenomenon has been particularly prevalent in recent years, with many young professionals, entrepreneurs, and students opting to migrate to countries such as the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia and other European countries (Williamson et al 2-4). Thus, the study showed that Nigerian youth migrants are counted in millions outside the shores of the country, and that most developing countries lost their highly skilled professionals to most developed countries in search of greener pastures. Thus, the socio-economic stand of many Nigerians coupled with the inability of Nigerian government to provide basic infrastructures such as electricity, coupled with high unemployment rates and lack of job opportunities for graduates, poor working conditions, low salaries, and limited career advancement prospects, political instability, corruption, and insecurity has cause pressure for many young Nigerians and trigger the Japa movement (Nwoke 42-54). Consequently, one of the main effects of the movement is that it has led to brain drain, with many of the country's brightest and most talented individuals leaving the country. Nigeria lost a lot of skilled workers to the labour markets of the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, the Netherlands and Australia. Many professionals, especially medical practitioners, bankers, academics and technology experts, are daily leaving the shores of the country for greener pastures abroad. Another negative effect is that the Japa syndrome cripple

industrial growth. Many key industries in Nigeria have shortage of adequate manpower. An estimated 70,000 skilled professionals emigrate from Africa each year, and Nigeria lost over 9000 medical doctors to the United Kingdom, Canada, and the U.S.A between 2016-2018. With this depleting number of medical doctors, Nigerians spend between \$1.2 billion and \$1.6 billion on medical tourism abroad annually (Olumoyo and Abiri 91-95). Inspite of the negative narrations of Japa movement, it can be beneficial or detrimental to the individuals as well as the society. According to the study, some youth meet with good luck, while some are greeted with misfortune. Those young people who met good fortune may come back home to alleviate problems in their homes, families, communities, towns and country. Though it was seen as a loss of manpower as well as that of qualified personnel, but if they come back to open new avenues, inventions and innovations, they contribute to the new frontiers of human and infrastructural development, it becomes a gain. The study concluded that before youths take to migration or Japa, they should weigh the rigours involved and properly prepare to manage the psychosocial outcomes of their decision.

Youth Migration :-Youth migration refers to the movement of young and middle-aged individuals, typically between the ages of 15 and 50, from one location to another within or across national borders. It involves the relocation of young people seeking better opportunities, including education, employment, economic prospects, or improved living conditions. Youth migration can have significant social, economic, and cultural implications for both the sending and receiving communities. Youth migration is a global phenomenon that has been on the rise in recent decades. It was gathered that human migration is the movement of people from one geo-political region to another, or the movement of people from one country to another. Migration is a fundamental part of human nature, which can be temporary or permanent relocation of a person from his or her place of primary abode to another place, in search of better living conditions, family reunification. Further studies showed two types of migration, which are internal and external or international migration. The internal migration could mean leaving one's geographical location for another one within the same country or leaving one's homestead and settling in another location within the same geophysical location or geo-political region. While the external or international migration means leaving one's country for another country. Young people make up about a quarter of migrants worldwide. Those involved are in the age bracket of 15-29 years with a mean age of 22 years. The study gathered that youths are increasingly leaving their home countries in search of better economic opportunities, education, or a change in lifestyle and that as many as 740 million people migrated to different countries, and among these young people are in the majority (Anyanwu, & Erhijakpor 51-60). Further studies revealed that there are many reasons why people migrate from one place to another. Thus, listed four common reasons why people move to other countries Economic Migrants: Economic migrants are migrants who are attracted to another country because of the greater economic opportunities. People moved from less economically developed countries to more economically developed countries in search of jobs and a comfortable life. Educational Migrants are people that move to other countries to acquire an education. Also war/civil unrest or state policies which discriminate against a particular group of citizens or people

forced many to migrate. The crisis going on in many places today has made many run to countries they never wished or dreamt to go as refugees. Lastly, family reunions has also been a cause of relocation of people from one country to another. In this situation, friends, relatives, partners, spouses, children or parents move to meet one of their own who is resident in another country. The impact of youth migration can be both positive and negative for both the sending and receiving countries. On the positive side, youth migration can lead to the transfer of skills and knowledge, remittances that support families back home, and cultural exchange. However, it can also result in brain drain, labour shortages, and social challenges such as integration and xenophobia (Iwuh 1-5).

Theatre Intervention:- Theatre intervention refers to the use of theatrical techniques, performances, and creative practices as a means to address social issues, raise awareness, and promote positive change in society. In the context of youth migration and the Japa Syndrome in Nigeria, theatre intervention involves utilising theatre as a medium to explore and communicate the socio-economic factors driving youth migration. Also, to engage and empower young individuals, and to foster dialogue as alternative pathways for youth empowerment and national development. It may include theatrical productions, workshops, community-based performances, and interactive interventions designed to provoke critical thinking, promote informed decision-making, and inspire social action. Theatre has long been recognised as a powerful tool for intervention, with its ability to raise awareness, challenge norms, and inspire action. Hence, playwrights, directors, and actors used the stage to address pressing social issues, from racism and sexism to political oppression and environmental degradation. Furthermore, one of the key ways in which theatre can contribute to intervention is by giving a voice to marginalised groups and telling stories that are often overlooked or misrepresented in the mainstream media. For the theatre to initiate change, it must produce theatrical performances that can challenge stereotypes, humanise the experiences of others, and foster empathy and understanding among audiences. In essence, theatre can be a powerful tool for community engagement and activism; if theatre companies and artists work directly with communities to create plays that address local issues and mobilise people to take action. This can take the form of street theatre, community-based workshops, or interactive performances that encourage audience participation. Thus, community theatre educates the populace in its pursuit of intervention by building on the skills the people have. Furthermore, theatre can be a viable medium for community education, conscientize the audience and mobilise marginalised groups in society who have been deprived of access to the more conventional forms of media (*Akashoro Ganiyu and Shaibu 110*).

(Akpodiete1-5) reaffirmed that theatrical productions help reinforce critical thinking capabilities and enable participants especially children, to change bad perceptions and imbibe good ideas. Theatre possesses the ability to drive intervention through the power of storytelling. By crafting compelling narratives that resonate with audiences on an emotional level. Playwrights and performers can create a space for reflection, dialogue, and transformation. Further, theatre stories have the power to

challenge dominant narratives, expose hidden truths, and imagine alternative futures. They can also create a sense of shared experience and collective identity, which can be a powerful catalyst for intervention. Theatre's ability to transform individuals and communities can not be overemphasise; thus, by engaging audiences in a live performance, shared experience, theatre can create a sense of connection and belonging that is difficult to replicate in other media. This sense of community can be particularly powerful in times of social upheaval and change, as people come together to process their experiences and imagine new possibilities. The theatre is a powerful tool for personal transformation. This can be achieved by immersing make-believe stories in the lives and experiences of others, therefore enabling audience to gain new perspectives, challenge their own assumptions, and develop a greater sense of empathy and understanding of life and society at large (Akand and Palasz 6). Therefore, theatre remains a powerful tool for intervention by giving voice to the voiceless, challenging dominant narratives, and inspiring action, theatre has the potential to transform individuals, communities, and societies.

Research Methodology

This study employed the qualitative research method. Unstructured questionnaires were administered on one hundred and twenty (120) respondents of which were forty (40) diaspora respondents and eighty (80) youths within the ages of 15-50 years. Play production and group discussion after each productions were employed as an intervention methods to achieved the purpose of the research work. Three (3) States were visited with the play production, namely, Abraka Delta State, Benin in Edo State, and Lagos State Ipaja. After every performance, there were focused group discussions that elicited worthwhile information from the respondents.

The population of the study: - The study focused on a total of 120 youths, 40 from the diaspora (online) and 80 from among youths within Nigeria. The respondents were between the ages of 15-50. **The Questionnaire:** - A total number of 120 questionnaires were distributed to 120 respondents in this order – 40 for those in the diaspora which was done online and 80 for youths within Nigeria, of which some were already considering migration.

Data presentation

Section a: socio-demographic data of respondents

Question 1 Age and gender of the respondents? A total of 120 respondents were involved in the questionnaires, play production and group discussions. They were youths between the ages of 15-50. Between 15-26 40 persons, 27-38 40 persons and 39-50 were 40 persons. The respondents were 60 males and 60 females respondents. This implies that both sexes were fully represented.

Question 2 Educational qualification of respondents? In this, respondents qualifications cut across those with Primary Six certificates as their highest educational qualifications, Secondary school

certificates, higher education degrees- College of Education, Polytechnic degrees, and University degrees as their highest educational qualification, some were postgraduate students, others undergraduates students. While some respondents were unskilled workers without educational qualifications. This shows that the issues of the Japa syndrome has nothing to do with being educated or not.

Question 3: Employment status of respondents? Question 3 survey result indicated that out of the 120 respondents, 50 respondents were unemployed graduates, 30 respondents were self-employed, 20 respondents were students. while 20 respondents were employed youths and middle aged persons. This implies that the notion of "Japa" is being envisaged by all classes of youths, the employed, unemployed, self employed and students as well.

Section B: Attitude Towards Migration and Japa Syndrome

Question 4: Have you ever considered migrating out of Nigeria? 50 out of the 80 youth respondents staying in Nigeria agreed that they had considered migrating out of Nigeria before now, but could not achieve it. For some, it was financial limitation, while the 40 diaspora respondents had already migrated out of Nigeria.

Question 5: If yes, what is your primary reason for considering migration? The responses show that out of the 40 diaspora respondents that were interviewed 15 of the respondents picked economic opportunities as their primary reason for considering migration, 10 respondents picked education, 10 respondents picked security reasons, while 5 respondents picked family reunification as their primary reason for considering migration. This shows that more youths migrated to seek for greener pastures and for a better living condition than for other reasons.

Question 6 Are you aware of the term "Japa Syndrome" and what it really mean? All the respondents were aware of the term "Japa". They also know that it is a term among young people that implies migration. This is a term that cut across State, and culture, is a national language among youths not minding the origin and tribe they belong to.

Question 7: To what extent do you believe the socio-economic conditions in Nigeria influence youth migration? It was gathered that 60 respondents believed very strongly that the socio-economic conditions in Nigeria influence youth migration, 12 strongly believed that the socio-economic conditions in Nigeria influence youth migration, 4 respondents don't know if socio-economic conditions in Nigeria influence youth migration, and 4 respondents do not believe that the socio-economic conditions in Nigeria influence youth migration. The 40 diaspora respondents agreed that the economic and political situation in the country encourages migration.

Question 8: Do you think the current government policies address the root causes of youth migration? The responses showed that 65 respondents agreed that the current government policies

do not in any way address the root causes of youth migration, 10 respondents did not think so, and 5 respondents were not sure of what the answer should be.

Question 9: How would you rate the impact of "Japa Syndrome" on Nigerian society. The responses gathered showed that 90 respondents rated the impact of Japa syndrome on Nigerian society as very negative, 10 respondents rated it as negative, while 20 respondents see it as not youths-friendly. Thus, it encourages the migration of capable, versatile and productive youths out of the country which has negative influence on the nation.

Question 10: Do you believe that migration is the only way to achieve personal success and security? It was gathered that 20 respondents did not believe that migration is the only way to achieve personal success, but they claimed that it is the easiest and most common way for young people to gainful employment. 95 respondents agreed that it is the only way, while 5 respondents were not sure. Many of the respondents see it as the only way for the low-income earners' children to get their parents out of poverty.

Section C: Realities of the Japa Migration

Question 11 : is the “Japa” migration as easy as it is made to look? From the 40 diaspora respondents, it was gathered that the realities faced by these youths as migrants were not what they expected. They agreed that it is not as easy as it is made to look, especially for youths without a sound educational background, no handwork and no relatives to put up with. The journey can be a stressful one. They had to do all manner of jobs to enable them to pay bills and care for themselves. Many of the online respondents claimed migrants find life difficult because many of the beautiful promises envisaged that spur them to embark on the journey were mirages. Hence they faced economic problems which deterred them from integrating into the system and prevented able from accessing some basic needs. Some migrants find it difficult to adapt to the new culture, cuisine, and weather conditions and to make friends, so they struggle to meet up with the new environment. In addition, some experience colour discrimination and xenophobia, which resulted in the hiding of identity.

Section D: Perceptions of Theatre As An Intervention

Question 12: Have you ever participated in a theatre programme or watched a performance that addresses social issues? Almost all the respondents have watched performances or productions that address social issues, but none have watched a performance that focuses mainly on migration issues.

Question 13: Do you think theatre can effectively raise awareness about the socio-economic factors driving youth migration? All the respondents agreed that theatre can effectively raise awareness about the socio-economic factors driving youth migration because of the unique qualities

it possesses. Through the use of storytelling method, theatre productions can create life experiences and challenges faced by migrants to the understanding of the audience understand and invoke empathy from them.

Question 14: Would you be willing to participate in a theatre programme that is focused on migration issues? The information gathered indicated that 60 respondents would be willing to participate in a theatre programme focused on migration issues, 20 respondents were not willing, the 40 online respondents were willing if they had the opportunity. To them, it will be very impactful in changing perceptions about migration because people practice more of what they see than what they hear.

Question 15: Would participation in a theatre programme that addresses migration issues make you reconsider your decision to migrate? 80 respondents believed that participating/viewing regular theatrical performances that address youth migration can make many youths reconsider migrating. 25 respondents did not believe that theatrical performance can make youths reverse their decision to migrate. While 15 respondents were unsure if participating in a theatre programme can make youths rethink their decision to migrate

Question 16: Do you think theatre performances should be developed specifically to address the "Japa Syndrome"? Many of the youths agreed that artistic performances should be developed specifically to address the Japa syndrome because it is a movement that is in vogue among youths and young people...

Question 17: How important is it to have more discussions about migration and "Japa Syndrome" within the rural and urban communities? Most of the young adult respondents indicated that having regular teachings, debates and discussions about migration and Japa syndrome within the urban and rural areas will not only reduce the desire to travel in an illegal manner. But it will also educate young people on the danger of such a journey,

The Theatre: Intervention Performance

Synopsis: "Look Inward and Not Outward"

A drama titled "*Look inward and not outward*" was created and enacted as an intervention performance to address the issues of youth migration. The storyline was on youths who migrated, some without complete documents, who became fugitives in a foreign land.

"Look Inward and Not Outward" is a drama that showcases the lives of 12 young people whose decisions to migrate took them through different life journeys. The play delved into the consequences of both legal and illegal migrations, and the prospects available to those young people who choose to stay and build their lives at home.

The story highlighted the plight of youths who migrated without proper documents. Influenced by false promises from friends with a sense of desperation, they abandon their education and careers, selling everything they own and leaving the country. They arrived in their foreign destination only to become fugitives, struggling to make ends meet and finding no support. Some were forced to drop out of school, while others, in the attempt to make ends meet, fell into a life of crime and became drug dealers.

In contrast, the play also showcased the success stories of two other groups. The first were the youths who chose to stay and "weather the storm" in their own country. Through hard work and resilience, they became captains of industry and gained international recognition. The second group were those who migrated legally. They have all the rights and privileges of their new country, allowing them to work, earn a living, prosper, and even become financial backers for significant projects back in their home communities.

The production showcased the negative and positive aspects and gave a balanced view of migration, and inspired young people to consider the potential for success at home. It also emphasises the importance of legal migration for those who choose to leave.

Performance and Impact

Following its performances in three states, the play was presented in various schools and institutions in collaboration with an NGO focused on youth involvement. Each performance was followed by a discussion, and within three months of this initiative, ten young men who had dropped out of school with the intent to migrate openly acknowledged their plans and returned to their studies.

As part of this project, selected youths were also given creative training in short story writing, skit production, and cartoon story development. These workshops were designed to help them discover their innate skills and learn how to use them to earn an income in the digital age, as a further encouragement for them to stay and thrive at home.

Discussion of Findings:- The study explores the potential of theatre as a powerful tool to address youth migration in Nigeria, particularly the phenomenon known as the "Japa Syndrome," where Nigerian youths increasingly seek opportunities abroad due to the challenges of the socio-economic conditions at home. Through the use of questionnaires, discussions and performance, the findings shed light on the complex factors driving migration and the role of theatre in offering alternative pathways for youth empowerment and national development. The impact of the "Japa Syndrome" on Nigerian society was viewed negatively by most respondents. Many participants recognised the challenges associated with migration, such as the potential for brain drain and the loss of human capital, which could further exacerbate Nigeria's socio-economic problems. Interestingly, while some respondents

did not believe that migration was the only path to success, a considerable number still perceived it as a viable option, underscoring the desperation and lack of confidence in local opportunities.

Among the respondents, none has participated in/ watched a theatre performance that addresses youth migration as a social issue. Despite this, many believed that theatre could be an effective medium for raising awareness about migration issues. A good number of participants expressed a willingness to engage in theatre interventions, reflecting an openness to alternative forms of education and dialogue. Additionally, there was strong support for the development of theatre programmes specifically designed to address the "Japa Syndrome," with many emphasising the importance of discussing migration and its implications within their communities. This suggests that theatre has the potential to become a significant tool in changing perceptions about migration and encouraging youths to consider alternatives.

The study also suggests that involving the community in the creative process of theatre productions can enhance their effectiveness. By engaging the target audience, particularly youths, in the development and performance of theatrical presentations, the messages are more likely to resonate and lead to meaningful action. This approach is supported by the survey respondents, who believe that community involvement is crucial for the success of theatre interventions. In the long term, theatre interventions have the potential to make a significant impact on the socio-economic well-being of Nigerian youths. By raising awareness, fostering dialogue, and providing education and skills training; the theatre can empower youths to make informed migration decisions and contribute to national development. Integrating theatre-based programmes with skill development can further enhance youth effectiveness by providing practical alternatives to migration. By leveraging the power of the theatre; there is an opportunity to create positive change and provide Nigerian youths with the tools and opportunities they need to build a better future at home. The Jean-Paul Sartre existentialist philosophy, which is the theoretical framework on which this work was based, was built on the tripod of personal freedom, individual responsibility and deliberate choice, which were a reflection of how individuals perceive life. As an influential existentialist, Sartre emphasised the importance of individual freedom and the ability to take responsibility as well as the role of choice and action in shaping one's life and creating individual identity (Senejani 15). It is in this light that the theatre intervention programme is meaningful and relevant to addressing youth migration.

Exposing youths to various intervention performances will enhance their ability to make the right choices and change their perception of life and life issues. It will build a strong inner resistance to negative peer influence, knowing full well that the choices they make today may lead to freedom or confinement tomorrow, for which they will take personal responsibility.

Conclusion

The study concludes that Theatre, with its ability to engage audiences emotionally and intellectually, offers a promising avenue for addressing the issues of the Japa/Youth migration. By incorporating authentic and relatable stories, theatre can resonate with the youth and inspire them to make the right decision and contribute to national development. Thus, storyline, dance drama, and all arts of the theatre can be employed to address all social issues that concern youth migration.

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