African Review of Economics and Finance, Vol. 5, No.1, December 2013
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University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

The Politics of Trans-Saharan Transit Migration in the Maghreb: Ghanaian Migrants in Libya, c.1980 - 2012

George M. Bob-Milliar[1] and Gloria K. Bob-Milliar[2]
1. Department of History & Political Studies, Kwame Nkrumah of Science & Technology, Kumasi
E-mail: gbobmilliar.cass@knust.edu.gh
2. Faculty of Mathematical Sciences, University for Development Studies, Tamale
E-mail:gkmilliar@yahoo.co.uk

Abstract

This article analyses Libya's changing status as both a migrant destination and a transit country. Libya and other Maghrebian states are said to be transit countries harbouring 'illegal' labour migrants from sub-Saharan Africa. Yet, when the Gaddafi regime fell in 2011, thousands of sub-Saharans including over 18,000 Ghanaian migrants headed south to their various countries of origin. Is transit migration a myth or a reality? How do African migrants view Libya? Are all migrants in Libya transiting to Europe? The main conceptual aim of this article is to interrogate the notion that Libya was the gateway for irregular migration to Europe. In this article, we argue that Libya has played different roles for different migrants: a destination to many and a transit for a minority. The shifting geopolitics of the region largely defines transit migration. The study's analyses reveal that: (i) the application of the transit concept is ambiguous if not dubious and it mostly affected sub-Saharan migrants, (ii) the arrest, detention and deportation of migrant workers from Libya increased with the normalisation of relations with Italy, (iii) a majority of migrants view Libya as a destination country.

Keywords: sub-Saharan Africa, transit, immigrant, migration, Maghreb

1. Introduction

In early 2011, the youth in several North African states confronted the political establishments that dominated their countries for decades. The popular revolts were against denied political and economic rights. The contagious uprising which began in the small Tunisian town of Sidi Bouzid spread to Egypt, Libya, and other parts of the Middle East (see, e.g., Honwana, 2013; Pace and Cavatorta, 2012; Joffé, 2011). The uprisings resulted in massive displacement of human populations in the Maghreb. As government machinery collapsed in one country after another, the question of the rights of aliens in the affected countries became a major issue in global politics. Thus, migration in its various forms took centre stage in the discourses surrounding the conflicts (see, de Haas and Sigona, 2012). Migratory flows mostly dominated by asylum-seekers and labour migrants have, since the early 2000s, become securitised (Léonard, 2010). As a consequence, European policy-makers were concerned about boats full of sub-Saharan Africans reaching Europe (de Haas and Sigona, 2012). Libya was said to be home to an estimated 1.5 to 2 million labour migrants (Bredeloup and Pliez, 2011; de Haas, 2008). This article analyses the claim that migrants in Libya are mostly headed for Europe. Libya has largely been a migrant destination country. Its status as a destination country was consolidated in the 1980s. Nevertheless, in the 1990s, a minority of sub-Saharans were joining Maghrebis to cross the Mediterranean to Italy, Spain and France (Bredeloup, 2012; Lucht, 2012; Bakewell and de Haas, 2007).

Libya offered many employment opportunities and, therefore, emerged as one of the favoured migrant destination in the Global South. Additionally, the defunct Colonel Muammar al-Gaddafi's regime pursued a pro-sub-Saharan foreign policy which meant relaxing immigration rules for African migrants (de Haas, 2008). As a result, the country became a magnet for labour migrants. Sub-Saharans found work in the informal low-skilled labour market in the construction and agriculture sectors. However, the changing geopolitics of the Mediterranean region, especially, after 2000 defined migrants' status. As a consequence, sub-Saharans living in Libya were said to be temporary residents who were desirous to move onto third countries, probably in Europe. To be sure, migration was crucial to Libya's rapprochement policy with European states (Paoletti, 2010). Indeed, at the height of the Libyan conflict, Colonel Gaddafi amplified the security aspects of irregular migration. He threatened Europe that 'millions of blacks' would swamp its cities if he were to be deposed (Lucht, 2011; Bredeloup and Pliez, 2011). Much earlier in October 2010, the European Union (EU) had paid the Gaddafi regime US$70 million to control the flow of African migrants (Lucht, 2011). So clearly, the empirical evidence shows that the transit migration phenomenon has been hyped. The active involvement of operatives of the Libyan regime in human smuggling to southern Europe is well known (Lucht, 2011). According to Lucht (2011), when the fighting intensified, armed Gaddafi loyalists forced migrants onto the high seas to provide evidence of irregular migration to the international community. Nonetheless, the majority of sub-Saharan migrants did not exploit the chaotic situation in Libya to go to Europe, but rather massed up at the country's international borders and waited for repatriation to their countries of origin (de Haas and Sigona, 2012).

For example, some 18,445 Ghanaians asked the authorities to send them to Ghana, not Europe (NADMO, 2012). This background

raises the following questions: Is transit migration a myth or a reality? How do migrants view Libya? Are all migrants in Libya transiting to Europe? These questions will guide our further analyses of the politics of transit migration in the Maghreb. Some recent studies on irregular migration from Ghana have focused on the health implications. Tanle (2012), for example, studied the health problems associated with irregular migrants from the Techiman and Nkoranza Municipalities of Ghana. Our study differs from the existing studies, because our interest is to interrogate the notion that Libya was a transit country for irregular migration to Europe. Essentially, our focus is on the politics of transit migration. Flowing from this, we argue that Libya has played different roles for different migrants: a destination to many and a transit place for a minority. Further, immigration policies introduced by western nations, have, paradoxically contributed to the phenomenon of transit migration. In Libya, the 'transit' label was applied selectively in response to the changing domestic and international scenarios. Based on *ad hoc* immigration policies, many sub-Saharans living in Libya were sometimes classified as labour migrants and at other times as transit migrants. The study's analyses reveal that: (i) the application of the transit concept is ambiguous, if not dubious and it mostly affected sub-Saharan migrants, (ii) the arrest, detention and deportation of migrant workers in Libya increased with the normalisation of relations with Italy, and (iii) a majority of migrants view Libya as a destination country. The rest of the paper is divided into four main sections. We begin by outlining the main conceptual discussions on Trans-Saharan migration. Next, we review intra-regional migration in Africa to help us understand West African migration patterns. A brief history of Ghanaian migration to the North African country forms the third section. The final section examines the politicisation and application of the transit concept to migrants in Libya.

2. Methodological Approach

The focus of this article is on the politics that surrounds transit migration. It attempts to interrogate the tensions in the concept and explain how the concept applies to migrants from sub-Saharan Africa. To better understand the politics of transit migration, different kinds of data have been collected. It must be stated that the paucity of data on Ghanaian emigration to Libya does not allow for a complete historical overview of the process. The qualitative data comes mainly from in-depth interviews, informal conservations, observations and official documentation from national (e.g., National Disaster Management Organization - NADMO) and international agencies (e.g., International Organization for Migration - IOM). However, the bulk of the empirical data have been collected through interviews with Ghanaian return migrants, public officers and local experts. We used the snowball or chain referral sampling process to select respondents for the interviews (similar to Tanle, 2012). The snowball method was found suitable because return migrants are a 'hidden' part of the general population (see, e.g., Abdul-Quader *et al*., 1981; Penrod *et al*., 2003; Biernacki and Waldorf, 2006). Consistent with the snowball approach, we first made contact with the NADMO officials and they recommended potential participants for the study. This first group of interviewees also recommended additional participants. In total, about 100 return migrants were contacted through the chain referral sampling. However, only 80 of the interviews were deemed useful for the article's analyses (see Table 1). Informal conservations were held with public officers and local experts. The in-depth face to face interviews were carried out in places including Wa, Tamale, Techiman, Kumasi and Accra. The themes explored in the interviews covered migration histories including when journeys begun and the routes used; working experiences and coping strategies in Libya. Additionally, six life histories were collected.

The interviews were conducted in June and December 2012 and, March 2013. In addition, telephone interviews were conducted in August and September 2012 with Ghanaians resident in the UK (six) and Germany (four) during the stay of the first author in Copenhagen, Denmark. English and Twi were used to conduct the interviews. In terms of the gender mix, mostly male return migrants agreed to be interviewed. The female returnees refused to be interviewed because of the stigma associated with female migration to Libya. Unmarried female migrants were alleged to be engaged in prostitution in Libya (*Ghana News Agency*, 30 August 2004; Tanle, 2012, p. 75). Indeed, a United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) report, published in January 2011 stated that 'many West African women work in the sex trade in the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya and Morocco'(p. 17). Other information was sourced from local newspapers (for details on the use of newspapers, see Bob-Milliar and Obeng-Odoom, 2011). Scholarly literature on transit migration and Euro-Mediterranean migration politics has made it possible to build a better conceptual framework and to have a better global view of the phenomenon.

Table 1: Some Characteristics of Ghanaian Libyan Migrants/Returnees

Ages	Education	Occupation	Route used to Libya	Journey time	View of the country
19-25 (30)	JHS (20)	Mechanic	Air (5)	6hrs (2)	Final destination (75)
26-35 (10)	SHS (30)	Masonry	Land route (75)	1-3 month (30)	Transit to Europe (5)
36-45 (30)	College (10)	Plumber		4-6 months (14)	
46-above (10)	Polytechnic (17)	Electrician		7 months-1yr (34)	
	University (3)	Teacher			
Total: 80					

Source: Fieldwork 2013.
JHS – Junior High School
SHS – Senior High School

3. Trans-Saharan Migration

Voluntary human mobility and settlement in the spaces between the fringes of the Sahel and the Mediterranean coast pre-dates the establishment of the current nation states. Nonetheless, scholarly writings on sub-Saharan African emigration to the Maghreb from insiders' perspective are rare. Indeed, in one of the few extant studies on migration in Libya, Sara Hamood (2008, p. 21) lamented the dearth of empirical research in sub-Saharan migration patterns and noted that the 'existing research on Libya remains limited.' The regimented nature of human activities, especially under Colonel Gaddafi made it impossible for outsiders to carry out research (Pargeter, 2013, p. 148). All the same, broadly, scholars have examined migration across the Sahara from two related angles. Some have examined the movement patterns of sub-Saharans and the development of 'migration corridors' (Bredeloup, 2012; Adepoju, 2008; de Haas, 2008). Scholars, including Paoletti (2011), have also examined the power relations between sending and receiving countries. Others have shown how transnational mobility has contributed to the urbanisation and transformation of the desert landscape. Relatedly, researchers have also examined the plight of migrants journeying through the Sahara desert or those trapped in the forests of Bel Younes at Ceuta, and those drowning in the Mediterranean Sea (Tanle, 2012; Bredeloup, 2012; Lucht, 2012, 2010).

Essentially, however, the discourse concerning transit migration, trans-Saharan and Mediterranean migration have been largely defined by the works of scholars including Düvell (2012, 2006), Paoletti (2011), de Haas (2007; 2008), Bredeloup (2012), Bredeloup and Pliez (2011), Collyer (2007) and Boubakri (2004). In these studies, the scholars have examined the dynamics in contemporary mobility patterns and pre-colonial economic activities in the Sahel region.

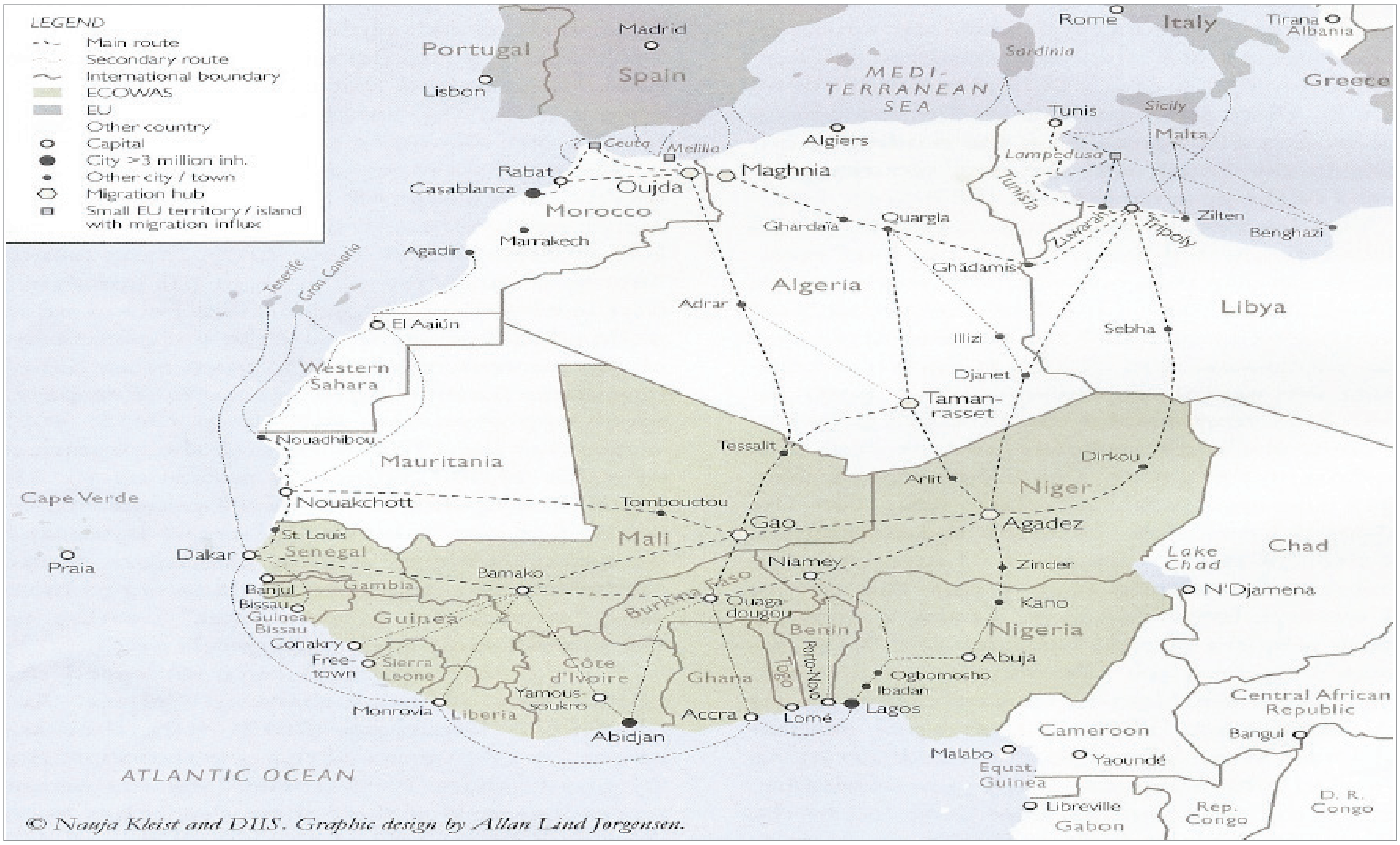
Yet, Düvell (2012), Bredeloup (2012) and Collyer *et al*. (2012) confront and, to a large extent, dispute the 'new' phenomenon of transit migration which describes the voluntary movement of sub-Saharan Africans between the regions separated by the Sahara desert and the Mediterranean coast. Putting these issues into their proper context, Düvell (2012, p. 416) defined transit migration as 'the migration of citizens from distant countries who cross several other countries before they arrive at the external borders of and finally in the EU [European Union].' Similarly, according to Bredeloup (2012, p. 459) 'a transit migrant leaves their [sic] place of origin to temporarily reach an intermediate space which would necessarily stand as a gateway to durable settlement in a third country, the country of destination.' Clearly, both definitions are influenced by European experiences (Düvell, 2006) and, therefore, appear over simplified. As a result, the authors and several others have drawn evidence from original empirical data and other available historical data to problematise the loaded concept of transit migration.

The assumption in both cited definitions is that all migrants living on the fringes of southern Mediterranean may be headed for European destinations. However, studies have shown that prior to the advent of western imperialism in Africa, trade relations existed between the Western Sudanese States/Empires and their North African counterparts (see, e.g., Boahen *et al*. 1986; McKissack and McKissack, 1995). Historians of West Africa categorised the trade across the Sahara, also known as the long-distance trade or the Saharan caravans into 'two branches' (Webster and Boahen, 1978, p. 60). The first branch 'flowed northwards to the Sudan, and then across the Sahara to countries of North Africa – Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya and Egypt – and even across the Mediterranean to southern Europe and the Middle East' (Webster and Boahen, 1978, p.60). The journeys between trading posts were undertaken in stages and they could last from one month to several years. In other words, sub-Saharan traders were transiting their wares through different market towns. Many of these itinerant traders created migrant communities when they settled in small towns and villages along the main caravan routes (Boahen *et al*. 1986). The thriving caravan trade between the two regions declined when European nations began their voyages in the second half of the fifteenth century. The decline of the caravan trade was linked to the development of the Trans-Atlantic trade in gold and slaves between West Africans and Europeans (Webster and Boahen, 1978, p. 61). This trade was confined to the coastal regions of West Africa. As a consequence, scholars have concluded that transit migration in sub-Saharan Africa is not a new phenomenon. Indeed, the 'newness' of the concept of transit migration is seen in its politicisation (Düvell, 2012; Collyer and de Haas, 2012; Bredeloup, 2012). International organisations engaged in migration management in the Global South tend to favour discourses that see the Sahara desert merely as a land route used by 'illegal' or irregular migrants, human and drug traffickers (Bredeloup, 2012; Collyer and de Haas, 2012; UNODC, 2011).

The transformation of desert spaces was the result of social upheavals and changes in climatic conditions. For instance, post-independence civil wars and drought conditions forced Tuareg nomads to look for new settlements and livelihoods opportunities in southern Algeria and Libya (Bredeloup and Pliez, 2011). As Bredeloup (2012, p. 462) notes, the 1970s witnessed the migration of some 14,000 Saharawis relocating to Algeria. The upshot is the development of important transit cities in the desert landscape occupied by Niger, Algeria and Libya. Some of these transit settlements have recorded 'spectacular growth rates as a result of in migration' (Bredeloup, 2012, p. 462). Sub-Saharan migrants have increased the populations of parts of the urbanised Sahara. According to one expert, migrants account for 20 per cent of the population of the Algerian Sahara (Bredeloup, 2012). It is important, therefore, to emphasise that the 'newness' of the transit migration phenomenon has been blown out of proportion.

To be sure, a minority of labour migrants continue to use clandestine means to cross the Mediterranean into European destinations (see, e.g., Lucht, 2012; Tanle, 2012; UNODC, 2011). The increasingly informal character of sub-Saharan migration to the Global North is partly due to the immigration policies of the receiving countries. Akokpari (2000, p. 72) has observed that 'shrinking immigration opportunities' has led to increasing numbers of Africans using 'informal alternatives' to reach their destinations. Restrictive immigration policies have led to many migrants using land routes to reach destination and transit countries in North Africa (Bredeloup and Pliez, 2011; Hamood, 2008; de Haas, 2007). Consistent with our findings on the routes used by migrants (see Table 1), experts say that the northwards journey from West Africa or Central Africa to the Maghreb is undertaken in several stages and the transit time may take between one month and several years (Bredeloup, 2012). Most land journeys transit at Agadez in Niger. West African migrants from Ghana, Togo, Benin, Burkina Faso or La Côte d'Ivoire usually travel through Niger's capital, Niamey. Along the migratory route, migrants undertake income generating economic activities to support themselves and to pay for the remainder of the journey (interview, Yaw, Tema, 9 December 2012). Those from Nigeria and Central Africa, journey through Sokoto and Kano in northern Nigeria (de Haas, 2007). From Agadez, the main route partitions into north-westerly and north-easterly directions (see Figure 1). The left, north-westerly route from Agadez passes through Arlit which branches into Tamanrasset in southern Algeria. The right, north-easterly route from Agadez heads to the Sebha region in Libya (de Haas, 2007).

Figure 1: Simplified map of international migration routes in and from West and North Africa


LEGEND
Main route
Secondary route
International boundary
ECOWAS
EU
Other country
Capital
City >3 million inh.
Other city / town
Migration hub
Small EU territory / island with migration influx
Madrid
Portugal
Lisbon
Spain
MEDI-TERRANEAN SEA
Rome
Italy
Sardinia
Tirana
Albania
Greece
Tunis
Sicily
Malta
Lampedusa
Ceuta
Melilla
Algiers
Rabat
Oujda
Maghnia
Casablanca
Morocco
Marrakech
Agadir
Tenerife
Gran Canaria
Ghardaïa
Ouargla
Tunisia
Zuwarah
Tripoli
Zliten
Benghazi
Ghadamis
Algeria
Adrar
Illizi
Sebha
Libya
Djanet
El Aaiún
Western Sahara
Taman-rasset
Nouadhibou
Tessalit
Mauritania
Dirkou
Arlit
Niger
Cape Verde
Nouakchott
Tombouctou
Gao
Agadez
Chad
Mali
Dakar
St. Louis
Senegal
Praia
Niamey
Zinder
Lake Chad
Banjul
Gambia
Bamako
N'Djamena
Bissau
Guinea-Bissau
Guinea
Burkina Faso
Ouagadougou
Kano
Benin
Nigeria
Conakry
Freetown
Sierra Leone
Côte d'Ivoire
Ghana
Togo
Porto-Novo
Abuja
Ogbomosho
Ibadan
Yamoussoukro
Monrovia
Liberia
Accra
Lomé
Lagos
Central African Republic
Abidjan
Cameroon
Bangui
Malabo
Yaoundé
Equat. Guinea
ATLANTIC OCEAN
Libreville
Gabon
Rep. Congo
D. R. Congo
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Sources: Brachet (2010), Hans (2008); www.imap-migration.org: migrationsatsea.wordpress.com

Meanwhile, each destination country in the Maghreb has its distinctive attraction: economic opportunities explain why young West Africans undertake the perilous journey across the desert to North Africa, and possibly across the Mediterranean Sea. For instance, Libya, the most popular of all the Maghrebian states, attained the new status of 'North Africa's migration pole' following the 1973 oil crisis (de Haas, 2006). Its booming oil industry encouraged the emigration of Egyptians and Sudanese [28] to work sites (de Haas, 2006). Even UN Security Council sanctions imposed between 1992 and 2000, and intended to cripple the economy did little to discourage migration to Libya. Rather, Libya's so-called international isolation or pariah status forced it to turn southwards to sub-Saharan Africa and this move culminated in the 'consolidation of migration routes and networks' (de Haas, 2006; Sánchez Mateos, 2005). Colonel Muammar al-Gaddafi's pan-African foreign policy included investing in African economies, sponsoring liberation movements and encouraging the free movement of persons (Sánchez Mateos, 2005, p. 440). Migrants filled local job vacancies and also fitted into the government settlement plans which were aimed at revitalizing under populated desert regions (de Haas, 2008). Prior to the emergence of Libya as a 'migration pole' in the Maghreb, sub-Saharan migration, especially in West Africa was largely intra-regional and limited to three growth poles that included Ghana, Nigeria and La Cote d'Ivoire (see, e.g, Van Hear, 1998; Akyeampong, 2000). Thus, the migration pendulum has swan between these states at different times. The next section discusses the configuration of this intra-regional migration.

4. Intra-Regional Migration in West Africa

In the colonial era, mobility in sub-Saharan Africa was characterised by a north-south movement (i.e., movement between the savannah-coastal zones). In West Africa, populations moved from the dry savannah and landlocked Sahelian region into the forest belt and coastal regions (see, e.g., Kress, 2006; Findley, 2004; Arthur, 1991). This migration pattern did not change after independence; it rather increased because of the great differences in economic development of the various states and the policies pursued by the nationalists' leaders.

By virtue of its pioneering role in leading the independence struggle against British colonial rule, Ghana became the first immigration country in West Africa until the late 1960s (Van Hear, 1998; Anarfi and Kwankye, 2003). Dr. Kwame Nkrumah's pan-African philosophy encouraged the immigration of other people from the sub-region into Ghana. However, economic decline, partly engineered by endogenous and exogenous factors (for details, see Bob-Milliar and Bob-Milliar, 2013) changed the country's net immigration status. Consequently, this period marked Ghana's transition from a net immigration to a net emigration country (Van Hear, 1998). For example, faced with a high unemployment situation in 1969, Prime Minister Busia's administration resorted to a knee jerk policy that targeted the immigrant community and this led to the expulsion of several West African nationals from Ghana (Peil, 1995). The solution to Ghana's precarious economic situation did not reverse with the expulsion of the over 200,000 'aliens.' However, by the mid-1970s Ghanaians were learning to adapt to the living conditions of immigrants in neighbouring countries. Declining livelihood opportunities coupled with the authoritarian rule of the Supreme Military Council (SMC I &II) and, much later that of the Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC) military junta encouraged more Ghanaians to emigrate (see, e.g., Adjei, 1994).

For instance, between 1974 and 1981, Van Hear (1998, p. 74) estimated that two million labour migrants left Ghana. This group of migrants who were both highly skilled and semi-skilled sought after employment opportunities in neighbouring La Côte d'Ivoire and later in Nigeria (Akyeampong, 2000; Anarfi and Kwankye, 2003). Ivoirian founding President Félix Houphouet-Boigny's policy of increased agricultural production encouraged the migration of low-skilled Ghanaian, Liberian, Malian, and Burkinabe, citizens who found employment in cocoa plantations (Riester, 2011). Migration to Côte d'Ivoire continued throughout the 1970s and 1980s. A significant development of this period, however, was the emergence of Nigeria as an immigration country. Nigeria replaced Ghana as West Africa's second popular migration destination (de Haas, 2007; Akyeampong, 2000). The 1973 oil crisis turned oil-rich Nigeria into a popular migration destination. Nigeria's oil windfall allowed the government to increase public spending. Improved pay packages and the availability of employment in the expanding economy attracted substantial numbers of West Africans (Van Hear, 1998). According to Akyeampong (2000, p. 206), Ghanaian emigration to Nigeria demystified transnational mobility 'as the preserve of the educated or the professional [classes].' The 'Agege' [29] experience popularised emigration and Ghanaians from all strata of the society could emigrate. Nigeria offered better opportunities to skilled, semi-skilled and non-skilled Ghanaians (for details on Ghanaian experiences see, e.g., Brenya, 1980).

A memorable period in the intra-regional migration history occurred in 1983 and 1985. When world oil prices plummeted in the early 1980s, the Nigerian economic miracle disappeared (Van Hear, 1998; Arthur, 1991). And similar to Ghana's recession a decade earlier, the economic decay caused massive social turmoil as the unemployment rate soared (Bump, 2006). In a populist fashion, the politicians used the immigrant community as the scapegoat. The migrants were accused of taking jobs away from Nigerians. In mid-January 1983, the government decreed that all migrants living in Nigeria without authorisation had to leave by the end of the month (Bump, 2006). An approximate 1.2 million Ghanaians returned to their homeland (Peil, 1995).

And, in 1985, the Nigerian government repatriated an additional 100,000 Ghanaians. Van Hear (1998, p. 78) captures it succinctly when he described this situation as a 'pendulum-like shifts in the relative fortunes of Ghana and Nigeria as poles of attraction for migrants.' Like Ghana, Nigeria also experienced a 'reverse migration transition', moving from a state of net immigration to a net emigration country (Black *et al*., 2004, p. 11).

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[28] Note that Sudan discovered oil in commercial quantities in 1980 in the Unity-Talih oilfield.

[29] Agege is a suburb of Lagos; however, it came to stand for Nigeria for Ghanaians in the 1980s.

The factors that caused economic decline in West Africa in the 1970s and 1980s were similar in both Anglophone and Francophone countries. Yet, after the decline of Nigeria, the only country that still offered some semblance of better employment opportunities in the sub-region was Côte d'Ivoire. From the mid-1980s to the early 1990s, Côte d'Ivoire consolidated its position as a major 'migration pole' in the sub-region (de Haas, 2007). The limited economic opportunities in the sub-region following the collapse of the Ghanaian, Nigerian and Ivoirian labour markets forced West Africans to widen their net and look further afield. Southern Africa, Europe, North America and some parts of Asia emerged as new migration destinations (Adepoju, 2008; 2004). After the demise of apartheid in 1994, South Africa which became known as the 'Europe of Africa' was a popular migrant destination (Akokpari, 2006, p. 136). Nevertheless, most West African migration is still within the sub-region.

The deteriorating economic situation in sub-Saharan Africa was not reversed with political liberalisation in the early 1990s. To be sure, some African countries, so-called 'star pupils' of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) recorded marginal improvement in their GDP, industrial output, and export earnings (see, e.g., Whitfield and Jones, 2009; Fosu and Aryeetey, 2008; World Bank, 1994, see also; Hutchful, 2002). However, as Monzini (2007, p. 163) rightly notes the 'so-called globalization is based on a paradox: the liberalization of international markets is not matched by a liberalization of the movement of persons or labour power.' Economic liberalisation encouraged a one directional movement of capital from the Global North to the Global South (Akokpari, 2006, p. 136). While exhorting the virtues of globalisation seen in the unfettered movement of goods and services, stricter border controls prevent African labour from reaching the Global North. After 2000, the issue of irregular migration from sub-Saharan to Europe was given some oxygen of publicity in the western media (de Haas, 2008). The image of 'Black Europe' (Bredeloup and Pliez, 2011) coupled with new security concerns forced governments in the Global North to adopt stricter border control policies. In the Global South, Libya emerged as one of the popular migrant destination for many Ghanaians. Indeed, it became the 'second best option' after European destinations. Drawing on the qualitative interviews, the next section, analyses Libya's changing status as both a migrant destination and a transit country.

5. Libya as a 'Second Option' Migrant Destination in the Global South

As indicated in the preceding section, Ghanaians became labour migrants in neighbouring countries from 1977 onwards. The mass expulsion of Ghanaian immigrants from Nigeria in the early 1980s coincided with a number of important developments in the nation's history. First, there was a new military government at the helm of affairs in the country. Earlier, on New Year's Eve in December 1981, a section of the military, headed by Flt. Lt. Jerry John Rawlings had overthrown the civilian government of Dr. Hilla Limann and declared a people's revolution (see, e.g., Hutchful, 1981; Rothchild and Gyimah-Boadi, 1997). Second, the national economy was in great difficulties (see, e.g., Aryeetey and Harrigan, 2000). News reports of daily activities in Ghana between 1983 and 1984 depicted a failing state. Natural and human factors were at the roots of the crises. In 1983, the country suffered one of the most devastating droughts in recorded history. The drought caused bushfire to destroy food crops. Ofori-Sarpong (1986) reported that the bushfires caused damage to 10,000 ha of food crop farms in southern Ghana. In the northern savannah, the fire destroyed rice farms Ofori-Sarpong (1986)'. Great hunger and misery characterised this period. Widespread hunger and conditions of malnourishment were observed in all regions of the country. As a consequence, Ghanaians from all social strata joined the daily queues to buy uncooked *kenkey* [30] and others took to eating any available root tubers. Many died from eating poisonous tubers. At the macro-level, two chroniclers of the era put it this way:

> *The economy had been largely devastated. Signs of collapse were everywhere … Roads acutely needed repair; much of the railways had ceased to function and the ports were in only slightly better condition. Power supply and telephone connections had broken down. Lack of imported spare parts had crippled much of the transport fleet and prevented repairs of the infrastructure (Chand and van Til, 1988, p. 11).*

This was the state of affairs migrants expelled from Nigeria met on their arrival in the country. However, for some of the migrants returning home to conditions of hopelessness and excruciating pain was out of the question. Some Ghanaian migrants used Nigeria as the spring board to explore new destinations in southern Africa, Europe, and North America (Bump, 2006). Kwame, a Ghanaian trader deportee from Nigeria compared their situation to that of 'frying pan to fire.' Other migrants, sarcastically nickname Ghana, 'ogyakrom [31]' and many citizens searched for avenues to emigrate (interview, Musa, Wa, 22 March 2013). Yet, it is important to emphasise that the early flows from Ghana were dominated by skilled workers and professionals. However, by the 1980s, many semi-skilled and non-skilled workers joined the migration train (Akyeampong, 2000). Political dissenters or so-called 'anti-revolutionary' elements also joined the emigration route (see Kwatei, 2012). Libya and other Gulf States emerged as second best options for a number of reasons. The cost of air travel was a crucial factor in determining which country the migrant went (interview, Nasamu, 29 August 2012). Comparatively, air fares to migrant destinations in the Global North were on the high side. Furthermore, the ability to procure the relevant travel documents in a timely manner also determined migrant destinations (*ibid*). Many prospective migrants encountered difficulties in procuring Ghanaian passports. As Musa recollected:

> *The early 1980s, especially, the years 1982 and 1984 were the worst period in our entire existence as a nation-state. All essential commodities including food were lacking, money was in short circulation and employers were not recruiting. We queued to buy uncooked kenkey and others took to eating root tubers and many died from eating poisonous tubers. Nothing was functioning in Ghana. The only option available was to migrate and at that time the favoured European destination was the UK because of our olonial ties; Germany and Italy also had friendly immigration policies. However, obtaining a Ghanaian passport was a luxury few could afford. Many of us emigrated to Libya as the second best option because we could neither obtain a Ghanaian passport nor afford the air fares to European destinations (interview, Musa, Wa, 22 March 2013).*

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[30] A cheap and common staple food made from corn flour.

[31] It literally means 'Fire town'.

The emigration of skilled Ghanaians to Libya started in the mid-1980s. In the early phase, the Libyan government recruited English teachers to teach in its schools [32] (interview, Nasamu, 29 August 2012). Altogether, some 200 teachers benefited from the scheme. Two batches consisting of 100 teachers each arrived in Tripoli in 1983 and 1984 (interview, Ayaric, 3 September 2012). The programme was so popular that several applications had to be rejected. Some nationals who were not qualified but eager to escape the hash living conditions resorted to the black market to buy false certificates. Yet still, others bribed their way through the selection process (interview, Nasamu, 29 August 2012). As one respondent put it, 'every abled Ghanaian wanted to get out of the country and the destination did not matter' (interview, Tettey, Accra, 16 December 2012). This guest worker scheme was stopped in 1986. Several reasons have been suggested. According to one source, the hostile relationship between the Libyan regime and the West compelled the Gaddafi administration to stop the teaching of English in public schools (interview, Nasamu, 29 August 2012). It is also said that many of the teachers refused to stay in the classroom but branched off to the more lucrative oil sector. Another reason given was that by the time the second batch of Ghanaian teachers arrived in the North African country; many Ghanaians were migrating to Libya on their own. The common theme is that throughout his forty-two years reign, Colonel Gaddafi's policies were at times populist, opportunistic and 'under continuous adjustment to the changing international scenario' (Sánchez Mateos, 2005, p. 439; de Haas, 2007).

The end of the programme did not affect the emigration pattern from Ghana to Libya. If anything, as several scholars have noted, this period witnessed the intensification of Ghanaian emigration to destinations including Libya (Van Hear, 1998; Peil, 1995; Anarfi and Kwankye, 2003). The awareness of decent livelihood opportunities in Libya encouraged many more labour migrants including engineers, accountants, physicians and teachers to emigrate. In the spirit of Gaddafi's pan-African policy, the state and Libyans responded positively to the arrival of migrant labour from sub-Saharan Africa. Many were prepared to do any menial job (see Tanle, 2012). Migrant workers were permitted to repatriate half of their monthly earnings to Ghana and the remainder was to be spent in Libya (interview, Ayaric, 03 September 2012). Nevertheless, some of the early arrivals, mostly high skilled professionals regarded their stay in Libya as temporary. As a consequence, after working in Libya for a number of years, some Ghanaians moved to Western Europe and North America. For instance, young graduate teachers saved part of their salaries in banks in the UK and after two or three years of work in Libya, many emigrated to Western Europe to pursue higher degree programmes (interview, Ayaric, 03 September 2012). This finding is consistent with the findings of scholars, such as de Haas (2008) and Lucht (2012) that say that in the 1980s, a minority of migrants used Libya as a transit to European destinations.

By the 1990s, however, non-skilled Ghanaian migrants replaced the skilled ones. Many in this group saw Libya as their final destination. The 1990s was the period of Gaddafi's renewed interests in sub-Saharan affairs after his pan-Arabism policy failed. Libya's active involvement as a regional power player was cemented in 1998 with the creation of Community of Sahel-Saharan states (Sánchez Mateos, 2005, p. 440). Membership of the community included Chad, Sudan, Niger, Mali, Burkina-Faso, Eritrea, the Central-African Republic, Djibouti, Senegal and Gambia (Sánchez Mateos, 2005, p. 440).

Thus, Libya emerged as a favourable migrant destination in the Global South principally because of Gaddafi's pan-African agenda, an ambitious agenda that saw him pumping funds into continental initiatives such as the setting up of the African Union (AU). In Libya, migrants were allowed to create their own communities. As Adu put it, 'Libya offered us quick cash and nobody could tell the difference between the Libyan burgher [33] and German burgher when we returned to Ghana.

What mattered most was the wealth one accumulated' (interview, Kwame, Kumasi, 4 July 2012). Indeed, the Libyan migration narrative was popular among the people of the Brong Ahafo region where four out of every five Ghanaians living in Libya were said to be natives of the region (see Table 2 and Figure 1; see also, Tanle, 2012).

Another respondent noted:

> *I travelled to Libya in March 1989 and I found the country so welcoming because I got employment with a construction company a day after my arrival. The paid was very good and I was able to make savings and I solved many problems back home. There are laws governing all nations and Libya is no exception. I lived in Tripoli for 23 years without encountering any major problem. Gaddafi treated us very well. Libya was my second home (interview, Kwabena, Madina, 28 December 2012).*

As Table 1 shows, in Libya, Ghanaian migrants were engaged in diverse occupations such as trading, plumbing, carpentry and farming. Nevertheless, plastering which they call 'malaga' was the most common work in the largely informal construction sector (UNDP, 2012). Success in Libya was measured by material accumulation. Accumulated wealth changed the status of migrants in their local communities in Ghana. Yet, migrants who used irregular routes to reach Libya encountered many problems (see Tanle, 2012). The challenges of the transit journey were not enough to deter others from using land routes to migrate to Libya. A majority of Ghanaian migrants viewed Libya as their second home; a destination country and were thus reluctant to return to Ghana.

The intensification of the conflict in 2011 disrupted the livelihoods of thousands of Ghanaians. With their lives in danger, the migrants reached out to the state to repatriate them home. Some migrants gathered at the Tripoli international airport, while others travelled by land to Salum on the Libyan-Egyptian border and to Ras Ajdir on the Libyan-Tunisian border where they waited patiently for evacuation to Accra (Republic of Ghana, 2011). The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) assisted with the evacuation of stranded migrants.

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[32] According to one source, the Libyan authorities requested for English teachers from Britain but this was turndown and the British Council recommended Ghanaian teachers.

[33] The term Burgher or Burger is used to describe a Ghanaian who has lived and worked in the Global North. The term has its origins in the German city of Hamburg where Ghanaian migrants lived and worked in the 1980s. It is said that most of the migrants were Twi-speaking Akans and they had difficulties pronouncing Hamburg and decided to shorten it to burger. The other, more credible version is that Ghanaian musicians resident in Hamburg invented a version of the popular high life music which they called burgher highlife (see, e.g., Collins, 2004; Akyeampong, 2000).

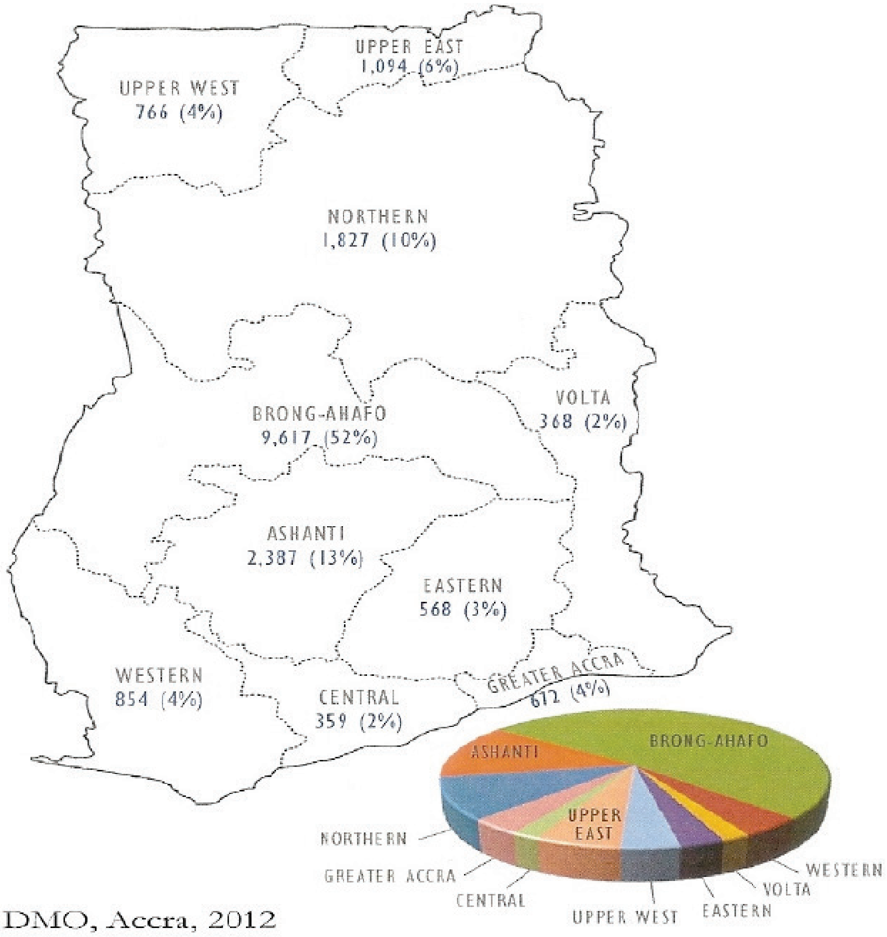
The IOM also provided medical care and coordinated the flight arrangements. Between 26 February 2011, when the repatriation process began to July 2012, when the process officially ended, 18,455 migrants were air lifted to Accra (NADMO, 2012) and about 1,500 migrants returned by their own means (Kleist and Bob-Milliar, 2013). In March 2011, President John Mills, then the president of Ghana, met a group of 63 returnees in Bolgatanga. The group had returned to the country via land through the Paga border in the Upper East region. The returnees said they walked from Libya to Niamey, Niger's capital were they boarded buses back to Ghana (*Ghana News Agency*, 27 March 2011). Table 2 and Figure 2 show the regional distribution of the returnees.

Table 2: Regional Distribution of Libyan Returnees, 2012

Region	No of Returnees	Frequency (%)
Greater Accra	665	3.6
Central	366	2.0
Western	852	4.7
Ashanti	2,375	12.8
Eastern	565	3.1
Brong Ahafo	9,520	51.6
Volta	373	2.0
Northern	1,834	9.9
Upper East	1,110	6.0
Upper West	785	4.3
Total	**18,445**	**100**

Source: Compiled by the authors from National Secretariat of NADMO, Accra, 2012

Figure 2: Regional Distribution of Libyan Returnees


UPPER EAST
1,094 (6%)
UPPER WEST
766 (4%)
NORTHERN
1,827 (10%)
BRONG-AHAFO
9,617 (52%)
VOLTA
368 (2%)
ASHANTI
2,387 (13%)
EASTERN
568 (3%)
WESTERN
854 (4%)
CENTRAL
359 (2%)
GREATER ACCRA
612 (4%)
ASHANTI
BRONG-AHAFO
UPPER EAST
NORTHERN
GREATER ACCRA
CENTRAL
UPPER WEST
EASTERN
VOLTA
WESTERN

Source: IOM and NADMO, Accra, 2012

Politically, Ghana and Libya have enjoyed long cordial relations at the highest level of government. Like most liberation or revolutionary movements in Africa at that time, the Rawlings-led Provisional National Defense Council (PNDC) administration also benefited from Colonel Gaddafi's largesse. The PNDC admitted in May 1983 that it had received 'quantities of military equipment as gifts from Libya' (*MONGABAY.COM*, 2012). Indeed, according to Haynes (1993), the PNDC adopted the Libyan development model. Nevertheless, the relationship between Accra and Tripoli weakened by 1984 when Ghana took a West turn and embrace the World Bank and IMF policies to resurrect it collapsing economy. Relations between the two countries were restored in the latter part of the 1980s through the establishment of the Permanent Joint Commission for Cooperation [34]. The interests of the two countries have always differed but Ghana was in favour of Colonel Gaddafi pan-Africa project partly because the original idea for such a continental government was mooted by Ghana's founding President, Dr. Kwame Nkrumah. The Gaddafi regime also invested in the Ghanaian economy.

The issue of irregular migration also attracted the attention of state officials in both countries. The mode of Ghanaian emigration to Libya was raised at some bilateral talks (interview, Accra, 26 June 2012). The Ghanaian authorities expressed concern about the alleged exploitation of nationals by their Libyan employers and the plight of migrants imprisoned for committing various crimes (ibid). The majority of older Ghanaian migrants regarded Libya as their second home. The next section examines the politicisation of transit migration.

6. Transit Migration in Libya: Politicisation and Instrumentalisation

As the twentieth century drew to a close, Libya increasingly became the gateway to Europe for a handful of Ghanaian migrants (see, e.g., Lucht, 2012, 2011; Tanle, 2012). The early 2000s also marked a turning point in Libya's relations with the West (Carbone and Coralluzzo, 2009; Sánchez Mateos, 2005). The US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 forced the Gaddafi regime to give up its programmes for developing Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) (*see CNN.Com*, 2/8/2012). As then president of the US, President George W. Bush put it, 'leaders who abandon the pursuit of [WMD] … will find an open path to better relations with the US and other nations' (*BBC News*, 2/8/2012; see also Sánchez Mateos, 2005).

The announcement on 10 March 2004 of Libya's willingness to abandon its WDM programme changed it pariah status within days. Thereafter, western leaders actively courted Gaddafi and, Tripoli was rewarded with high profile visits. On 24 March 2004, British Prime Minister, Tony Blair led the way when he visited Libya and declared a 'new relationship' with Tripoli. A second visit by Blair in May 2007 cemented the 'deal in the desert' worth $900 million between British Petroleum (BP) and the Libyan National Oil Company (Ramdani *et al*., 2010).

At the same time, the country's immigration policy came under scrutiny with the re-engagement with the international community. Indeed, the European Council considered 'the issue of illegal immigration, a major source of concern both for Libya and the EU' as one area of mutual interest (Sánchez Mateos, 2005, p. 442). Adjei, a Ghanaian plumber who lived in Libya between 1986 and the time of our interviews, linked the changing fortunes of African immigrants to the re-establishment of diplomatic relations with the west, especially Italy, when he said: 'our problems in Libya started when Gaddafi started talking to Silvio Berlusconi. Libya's new immigration rules criminalised all migrants and it did not matter if you had a valid work permit or not' (interview, Madina, 13 December 2012).

Diplomatic relations between Libya and the West deteriorated after Libya was accused of sponsoring a number of terrorist activities. But Libya' relationship with its northern Mediterranean neighbours, especially Italy was unproblematic. Italy was the former colonial power and Libya has long demanded for reparations for some colonial wrongs. The 2000s witnessed the official atonement of Italy's colonial wrongs in Libya. A 'Treaty of Friendship, Partnership and Cooperation' was signed on 30 August 2008 in Benghazi (Carbone and Coralluzzo, 2009, p. 433). The issue of illegal immigration was captured in the treaty. Silvio Berlusconi, Italy's Prime Minister at the time, succinctly summarised the significance of the treaty when he said: 'fewer illegal immigrants and more oil' (cited in Carbone and Coralluzzo, 2009, p. 433). Additionally, with increased security concerns especially after the terrorists' attacks in the US (11 September 2001), Madrid (11 March 2004) and London (7 July 2005), irregular migration became a major concern of western governments. As a consequence, the lines between transit and 'illegal' or irregular migration became politicised. Sub-Saharan migration to Libya and other Maghreb countries which were largely irregular became securitised (see UNODC, 2011). Thus, sub-Saharans, including Ghanaians, living in Libya were said to be waiting for boats to continue their journey into Europe. The politicisation and instrumentalisation of transit migration had several consequences which included arbitrary arrest and detention and possibly deportation to the sending countries (Tanle, 2012; Pargeter, 2000; Spencer *et al*., 2001).

The issue of irregular immigration from sub-Saharan Africa has created frictions between European governments and several sending countries in the region (Sánchez Mateos, 2005; de Haas, 2008). In this context, Lutterbeck (2006, p. 59) notes that 'illegal immigration … has increasingly come to be viewed as a security or strategic risk in many if not all European countries.' The EU solution to 'combating illegal' migration was the setting up of Frontex (a border agency) in 2005, based in Poland. Frontex has the mandate to police the external borders of the EU (Léonard, 2010; Pollak and Slominski, 2009; Wolff, 2008; Lutterbeck, 2006). However, Wolf's (2008, p. 257) analysis has shown that most of Frontex operations have 'concentrated on migrants from West Africa and across the Mediterranean sea.' The agency has entered into agreement with some West African countries to patrol their coastal areas. The paradox is that, while, the EU promotes the free mobility of labour within the Schengen zone; it nevertheless continues to put pressure on so-called transit countries such as Senegal, Mauritania, Cape Verde, Guinea and the Gambia to regulate the movement of West Africans within their territories (Wolf, 2008, p. 257).

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[34] Personal Communication, an official at Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Accra, 26 June 2012.

According to Van Criekinge (2010), the migration agenda of most African governments has generally been about the 'migration-development nexus': migration management or control is not the focus of most African governments. According to experts, international migration has become a 'safety valve' for most African government who struggled to provide adequate employment for their teeming youth (de Haas and Sigona, 2012). Meanwhile, western governments are under pressure to control immigration. Destination countries employ diplomatic niceties to pressured sending African states to control migration (Van Criekinge, 2008; Wolf, 2010).

Nevertheless, these diplomatic pressures are at odds with ECOWAS protocol on free movement of persons within the sub-region (see, e.g., Akokpari, 2006; Adepoju, 2002). In 2005, for example, some 44 Ghanaian migrants who were said to be in transit through the Gambia were shot dead in two Gambian coastal villages (*Modern Ghana News*, 24 August 2009). The killings resulted in the deterioration of relations between the two countries. It must be emphasised that the externalisation of EU migration policy to North African countries, especially the Italy-Libya relationship, has contributed to the constantly evolving character of sub-Saharan migration in the Maghreb (Carbone and Coralluzzo, 2009). As the empirical evidence shows, migrants became scapegoats in Gaddafi's attempt to extend his influence across the Mediterranean. In the case of irregular migration, it appears European states had their hands tied because of human rights concerns. Libya is not a signatory to the 1951 Geneva Convention on the rights of refugees (Sánchez Mateos, 2005). As a consequence, the Gaddafi regime operated within its own set of laws. And this had implications for transnational mobility in Africa (Pargeter, 2001).

In the months of September and October of 2000, the cordial relations between African immigrants and Libyans deteriorated. After nearly two decades of peaceful co-existence and relative tolerance; black African migrants started to face all sorts of abuses (Bredeloup and Pliez, 2011; Collyer, 2006; Schuster, 2005; Pargeter, 2001). The end of September 2000 was marked by 'brutal and spontaneous violence.' Sub-Saharan immigrants living in Tripoli and Zawiya were attacked by 'gangs of youth' (Pargeter, 2001, pp. 90-93; Bredeloup and Pliez, 2011; Johnson, 2000).

As Pargeter (2001, p. 90) notes, 'one of the most significant aspects of this brutality was the response of the Libyan security services who either stood back and allowed the violence to continue, or in some cases joined in the attacks themselves.' In the anti-immigrants riots, 100-130 sub-Saharan migrants were killed (Pargeter, 2001, p. 90; Bredeloup and Pliez, 2011; Johnson, 2000). Youth unemployment was cited as one of the reasons for the violence.

The Libyan authorities' response to the violence was to remove migrants from the affected areas. They moved 'large numbers of survivors to camps in the outskirts of Tripoli, along with other migrants who had been ejected by their landlords during the unrest' (Pargeter, 2001, p. 90). Many immigrants including Ghanaians and Nigerians were rounded up by the security forces and sent to various detention camps located in the Libyan Desert (Global Detention Project, 2009; Human Rights Watch, 2006). The head of Italy's secret service told the Italian Parliament that 'undocumented migrants in Libya are caught like dogs' and described the conditions under which they were detained as appalling to the extent that 'policemen must wear a dust mask on the mouth because of the nauseating odours' (cited in Global Detention Project, 2009).

The Libyan authorities justified their arrest of undocumented immigrants saying that their presence was contributing to rising levels of crime (Pargeter, 2001, p. 92). As one official noted, 'some of them who can't get a job, get involved in drug peddling, prostitution and armed robbery' (cited in Johnson, 2000). However, many researchers have noted that the change in immigration policy, which imposed entry visas on both Arab and African immigrants, was the consequence of the bilateral co-operation between Italy and Libya (Carbone and Coralluzzo, 2009; Sánchez Mateos, 2005). According to de Haas (2008, p. 1310), Libya's immigration policy shift was the result of Gaddafi's 'efforts to regain international respectability, to lift the embargo, and to attract foreign direct investments.' Forced removals became frequent in Libya. From an initial number of 4,000 migrants in 2000; deportation increased to 54,000 by 2004 (CARIM, 2010). For example, in 2003, 11 per cent of deportees were Ghanaians (CARIM, 2010). Deportations from Libya to Ghana increased dramatically and, between January and August 2004, 2,373 Ghanaians were sent home (*Ghana News Agency*, 28 September 2004). While some of these deportees were migrants apprehended in Italy (Lucht, 2011), others were long-time residents rounded up in the various Libyan cities (interview, Yaya, Accra, 13 December 2012). Many were alleged to possessed false documents and others were linked to petty crime. Yet, in all arrest cases, if the migrants could afford the bribe asked for by the Libyan policemen they were release without charge (*ibid*).

Increasingly, Ghanaians like Africans elsewhere on the continent, are emigrating in search of better paying jobs and decent livelihood opportunities (IOM, 2009; Akokpari, 2006; Anarfi and Kwankye, 2003; Akyeampong, 2000). Nevertheless, the Ghana government occasionally puts the issue of migration on the discussion table in order to attract development aid and also to benefit from the limited numbers of temporary work permits for immigrants (see Kleist, 2011). The enforcement of stricter border control by EU states has forced majority of the low-skilled or the so-called 'undesirables' to use irregular alternative means to gain entry into Europe. Libya's role as the policeman of the Mediterranean is seen by Ghanaian migrants as hypocritical because its economy is heavily dependent on immigrant labour (interview, Seidu, Wa, 16 June, 2012).

The politicisation of transit migration has seen the Libyan authorities arrest, detain and deport Ghanaians. Deportation, whatever its shape, or form, is embarrassing to the government and the affected individuals. From the perspective of the government, irregular migration is a symptom of underdevelopment. Thus, ruling regimes in Africa are often hesitant when it comes to the readmission of irregular migrants (see de Haas, 2008). On the thorny issue of immigrant rights and deportations, the government of Ghana has on a number of occasions tried to negotiate with the Libyan authorities to secure the rights of nationals in detention centres (*afrol News*, 2012; Johnson, 2000). The government has intervened to ask for reprieve for a number of nationals on death row in Libya (Marma, 2008). However, Libya continued to deport undocumented Ghanaians. In total, some 12, 202 undocumented immigrants were removed to Ghana in the period between 2000 and 2010 (NADMO, 2012). From the point of view of the individual; deportation is the worst nightmare of the migrant. Many youth from poor families, emigrate to acquire wealth to improve the socio-economic conditions of their dependents back home.

Ghanaian deportees from Libya, most times were flown in cargo planes and they arrived in Accra looking traumatised, unkempt and sometimes with signs of physical torture on their bodies. On one occasion, deportees from Libya refused to disembark when they arrived at the Kotoka International Airport (*Ghana New Agency*, 28 September 2004).

7. Conclusion

As the twentieth century drew to a close, autocratic regimes in sub-Saharan Africa were pressured by domestic and international constituencies to embrace liberal multi-party systems. Meanwhile, purely for geopolitical and strategic interests, western nations, the 'apostles' of human rights looked on while North Africans were oppressed by their leaders. Autocratic rule persisted in the Maghreb for decades and was characterised by limited civil liberties, exclusivity and social injustice. The decades of oppression were ended in 2011 when the citizens of Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya deposed their leaders through popular uprisings.

The spontaneous and yet popular uprisings have left an indelible mark on migration patterns in the region and in sub-Saharan Africa. The particular case of Libya is significant. The dismantling of the four decades old administration of Colonel Gaddafi had several repercussions for the region, sub-Saharan Africa and the EU. Libya was home to some 1.5 million labour migrants from some 120 countries across the globe.

Indeed, virtually every country in the world had a national working in Libya at the time of the conflict. The conflict in Libya exposed the magnitude of global migration. External observers expressed anxiety about the fall of the Gaddafi regime. The EU was concerned about so-called 'undesirables' landing on European beaches. Migrant sending African states were anxious about the potential consequences of the mass return of nationals. And families in extremely poor countries were worried over the loss of remittance income. Nonetheless, the true impact of the conflict is yet to be fully appreciated in the sending countries.

This article has analysed claims about transit migration using the case of Ghanaian returnees. In doing this, the article reviewed the pertinent literature on transit migration and trans-Saharan African migration. On the issue of transit migration, it is clear that the dominant claims about Africans are dubious. Modern technology and immigration policies have come to define transit migration. In typical western conceptualisations, these crucial variables are eliminated in the analyses. Additionally, an important variable missing in the conceptualisation is the cost element (except Van Hear, 1998; Bredeloup, 2012).

Libya became a migration magnet in the late 1970s and early 1980s when the west imposed air and trade embargos on the Gaddafi regime for allegedly sponsoring terrorism. Crippled by western sanctions and not getting the cooperation of Arab neighbours, Gaddafi turned to sub-Saharan Africa. Libya's engagement with the region opened the doors for West Africans to emigrate to the country. The 1973 oil crisis gave a huge boost to the Libyan economy. The expanding economy created job vacancies that needed manpower from outside Libya to fill. After the 1990s, Libya continued to attract migrants from Ghana, increasingly as a destination country. Mostly, poorly educated and with low-skills, young Ghanaians used land routes to reach Libya. Many migrants began their journey with the sole aim of reaching Libya, and staying in that country. The travel time for a journey lasted from one month to several years, depending on available funds. While some in the migration business maintain that African migrants are helpless and are subject to abuse by brokers within the industry (cf. Sørensen and Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2012); the empirical evidence proved this assumption not to be entirely accurate. In the case of Ghanaian migrants, the trips to Libya were usually led by a 'battle-scarred' desert veteran. The dangers of irregular migration are known. Yet, many young Ghanaians undertake it because migration has proved beneficial to individuals and their local communities.

The mixture of domestic politics and international diplomacy has affected the conceptualisation of transit migration. Politically, Gaddafi's denouncement of WMDs was very significant as it paved the way for Libya to become a member of the community of nations. In Gaddafi's attempt to gain more 'international respectability', transit migration was worn a political gown and genuine labour migrants delegitimised as undocumented migrants. Encouraged by the EU's agenda to limit the number of Africans migrating to Europe, the Libyan authorities proceeded to make arbitrary arrest, detained and deported several thousands of sub-Saharans to their countries of origin. At the same time, several states in the Global North have adopted restrictive immigration policies. The need for certain categories of migrants is in tandem with populist-led hostility towards those deemed 'undesirable', of whom transit migrants have been particularly disadvantaged. For example, the introduction of the Points Based System by the UK government in 2006 has narrowed the migration space and labour markets to the highly skilled. As a consequence, while there is access to the labour markets for medical professionals (especially nurses and doctors), software specialists, and academics; states have tightened up controls for the less-skilled. With few legal migratory routes available to the less-skilled, some sub-Saharan Africans started to join 'illegal' Mediterranean crossings from Libya after the mid-2000s. The Libyan conflict exposed the scale of the irregularity of Ghanaian migration to the North African country. Significantly, the conflict has also put to rest the decades long falsehood that Libya was a temporary space harbouring millions of labour migrants with the sole objective of seeking a permanent settlement in a third country. Libya was a destination country in its own right.

George M. Bob-Milliar lectures for both graduates and undergraduates on the Politics and History degrees at the Department of History and Political Studies, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi-Ghana. His work focuses on democratization in Africa, political economy of development, informal economies, African Diaspora, chieftaincy, qualitative methods and Ghanaian migration patterns. His articles have appeared in leading journals including *The Journal of Modern African Studies, African Affairs, Democratization, Journal of Asian and African Studies, Africa: Journal of the International African Institute, African Review of Economics and Finance, Urban Anthropology, International Journal of African Historical Studies, and African Studies Quarterly*. He has received prizes both for his published work (the prestigious African Author Prize for the best article published in *African Affairs* by an author based in an African institution, 2010), and for his contribution to research on African policy issues (from the Centre for International Governance Innovation (CIGI, 2012). E-mail: gbobmilliar.cass@knust.edu.gh

Gloria K. Bob-Milliar lectures financial mathematics at the University for Development Studies, Navrongo Campus. She was trained at the Brunel University, West London where she graduated with an MSc in Financial Economic in 2007. She received her honours in Economics and History at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi-Ghana. Her research interests are in the area of development economies, financial regulation, banking supervision, international remittances, migration and the African diaspora. Her publications include (with George M. Bob-Milliar) 'The economy and intra-party competition: presidential primaries in the New Patriotic Party of Ghana' *African Review of Economics and Finance* 1(2) (June 2010); (with Gladys B. Tampoare and Aaron N. Adazabra) 'Analyzing the Economic Benefit of Fresh Tomato Production at the Tono Irrigation Scheme in Upper East Region of Ghana' *Journal of Economics and Sustainable Development*, 3 (13) (2012); (with George M. Bob-Milliar) "Mobilizing the African Diaspora for Development: the Politics of Dual Citizenship in Ghana," in Toyin Falola and Kwame Essien (eds.), *Pan-Africanism, and the Politics of African Citizenship and Identity* (NY: Routledge/Taylor and Francis Group Press, 2013). E-mail:bobmilliar@yahoo.co.uk

Acknowledgements

The first author acknowledges his debt to Nauja Kleist and the Migration Unit at the Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS) for the invitation to be part of the project 'New Geographies of Hope and Despair.' This paper emerged from the working paper produced at DIIS. We thank the two anonymous reviewers and the editors for their constructive comments on earlier drafts. Nevertheless, the authors bear the responsibility for any remaining errors.

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