WEST AFRICAN ‘STONE BOYS’ AND THE MAKING OF THE IBADAN MINING FRONTIERS SINCE THE 1990s*

By

Rasheed Olaniyi, PhD
Department of History, University of Ibadan
Email: rasolaniyi@gmail.com

Abstract

In the last decade of the 20th century, the city of Ibadan, capital of Oyo state, Nigeria, received a substantial number of immigrant entrepreneurs, the “stone boys” from the West African sub-region, who were actively involved in the export of gemstones. This paper explicates how culture of migration, prevalent among West Africans intertwined with entrepreneurship in the international gemstones trade, and its implications on the Nigerian economy. It argues that gemstones trade among West African immigrants was an inherited commercial heritage. Mining and gemstones trade owed much to the socio-cultural legacy from the past. Economic history of Western Sudanese empires records the dramatic role of the Wangarawa and Soninke merchants in the precious stone trade from at least 5th century A.D. Interestingly, like their predecessors, contemporary “stone boys” originate from Mali, Guinea, Gambia and Senegal. Since the early 1990s, West African immigrants in Ibadan have benefited from the benign neglect of the mining sector by the Nigerian state. The paper contends that lack of investment in the non-oil solid mineral sector provided a leeway for peasant miners and unregulated export of gemstones. Globalisation processes coupled with flexible outlook of ECOWAS free movement protocols attracted many immigrants into the gemstones trade in the city of Ibadan and its hinterland areas. By 2008, declining fortunes in the mining sector, due partly to the introduction of indigenous mining companies, made many of these immigrants to survive at the margins of urban economy, especially Okada (commercial motorcycle) riding. The illicit flow of gemstones to the international market undermined the process of economic development in Nigeria.

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Gemstones Trade in West Africa: Past and Present

Gemstones trade had been carried out in West Africa before A.D. 400. It was one of the articles of trade which traversed the Western Sudan and Guinea to the shores of the Mediterranean and Red Sea. North African traders bought gemstones from West Africans in exchange for Saharan salt and North African commodities along trade routes, which connected Senegambia with Middle Niger country of Western Sudan, together with the forest region of Cote D’Ivoire and Ghana. The Madinka of Kangaba, Mali empire were middlemen in the gold trade of ancient Ghana. They were also important in the trading of Wangara gold, now northern part of the Republic of Guinea. Dyula or Wangara traders of Mali also became famous for their skill and enterprise in gold trade across Western and Central Sudanese states. The best known of all the Wangara were the Dyula, a name which became synonymous for ‘a trader’ (Levtzion, 1973: 167).

Soninke immigrants carried from their homeland the memory of their old kingdoms and commercial heritage. Several centuries on, it is important to underscore how the Soninke and Wangarawa monopolised gemstones trade, despite the intervening years of colonial rule. Over the years, the Soninke and Wangarawa held on to their commercial heritage and family tradition in the intercontinental gemstones trade. Wangara was the corporate name for commercial groups controlling the external trade of Songhai, Bariba states, and Hausa cities (Lovejoy, 2005: 131).

At different periods, the power of language reinforced commercial identity and hegemony in the gemstones trade. Mande languages, a sub-group of the Niger-Congo family include Soninke (Serahuli), Malinke (Madinka), Bambara and Dyula. The “stone boys” discussed in this paper are West African immigrants in gemstones business who were mainly from Guinea, Senegal, Mali
and the Gambia. They were principally Soninke, Madingo, Fulani and Jakanke. They spoke Bambara, Madingo and Madinka languages. For Guineans, Senegalese and Malians, gemstone trade was an inherited business. Mining business was characterised by constant mobility and migration. Modern migration systems among the Soninke and other related groups were historically rooted, driven largely by economic considerations, cultural values and prevailing socio-political forces. Migration has, for generations, been a productive force and an inherent feature of life for the Soninke (Jonsson, 2008: 12).

In the 1990s, both Hausa and West African immigrants were re-united by a commercial heritage dating back to the 16th century to dominate the informal mining sector in Ibadan region and throughout Nigeria. As immigrant entrepreneurs, West African “stone boys” in Ibadan benefited from the benign neglect of the mining sector by the Nigerian state. Between 1990s and 2000s, immigrant entrepreneurs made fortunes from the marketing of gemstones which they dominated. The “stone boys” represented a new process of capital accumulation in West Africa. They lived in Ibadan city and offered employment opportunities to peasant miners in the rural areas. As young men between ages 18 and 40, they sent remittances to their home countries, bought cars and had enough money to enjoy life.

**Migration of the “stone boys”**

The culture of migration aided the entrepreneurship of “stone boys” who were highly mobile young men moving from one country to another in search of commercial opportunities. From the 1990s, the political and economic history of the continent rapidly transform migration streams. As demonstrated by Adepoju (2005: 1), historically, migrants regarded ECOWAS sub-region as an economic unit within which trade in goods and services flowed, and people moved freely.
ECOWAS protocol on human mobility and free movement reinforced historical convergence in West Africa since pre-colonial era. Transborder activities revolves around informal economic activities and what Asiwaju (1985 : 12), describes as "an enormous movement of men and material across the boundaries." Asiwaju also notes that migrant networks in the West African sub-region contribute to the establishment of market centres, "which normally attract business transactions from remarkably extensive areas without much regard for international boundaries" (Asiwaju, 1992). Asiwaju further observes that the contemporary networks of informal economic activities are ‘survival elements’ of pre-colonial regional trade. Ade-Ajayi (1988 : 10) argues that the importance of the trading communities of strangers in different parts of West Africa, especially in the Sudan belt, is not in doubt. What needs to be stressed is how they functioned and operated.

From the 1990s, West African immigrants continued to move as their mode of livelihoods were threatened by civil wars, communal violence, misgovernance and development quagmire on the African continent. In the process, ECOWAS free mobility protocols, historical linkages and porous borders have been manipulated by immigrants who stayed in Nigeria beyond the three months (90 days) period. Majority of West Africans in Ibadan are irregular immigrants (that is, immigrants who live in the country without legal permits).

The influx of West African immigrants to Ibadan in the era of globalisation and instability in the sub-region transformed the demographic base of the city. Since the early 1990s, Ibadan witnessed massive influx of people and business which helped the city to grow demographically and economically. At the turn of the 21st century, Ibadan transformed from the largest indigenous city in West Africa to an inclusive globalizing city. The population of Ibadan increased from 1,222,663 in 1991 to 1,338,659 in 2006.¹ Indeed, the high level of West African migrants’ population in Ibadan signified the most visible sign of integration in the Sub-region since the
adoption of ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement of Persons and the Right of Residence and Establishment in 1979. As young entrepreneurs, “stone boys” utilised their creative ingenuity to explore opportunities in various parts of the world.

Without education and capital for business, it was difficult for most of the youths to survive in their own countries. Jango Ceesay, a 39 years old Gambian gemstone dealer in Ibadan declared that, “I cannot make it in my country.” In most of the sending countries, it was the responsibility of young men to supplement family income through remittances. To find solution to these problems, most of the youths migrated in search of commercial opportunities and money to enable them to assist their poor families. From 1990s, many Senegalese, Guineans, Gambians and Malians traversed other African states in search of commercial opportunities as well as means of livelihoods. Therefore, most of the “stone boys” had lived in other African countries before settling down in Nigeria.

Migration involves numerous preferences. From the profiles of the informants, the decision to migrate was overwhelmingly economic. The desire of most migrants was to (a) look for another means of improving business (b) explore new sites of mineral deposits and (c) ambition and money always make man move. The ambition of some of the migrants was to migrate to Europe, when such ambition failed due to stringent migration policies in the EU, they explored opportunities in other African countries. It is evident from the fieldwork that young immigrants from poor countries in West Africa tend to migrate for greener pasture and gain entrepreneurial experience in the sectors dominated by their kinsmen. In addition, lack of education or search for it provoked migration. One informant confirmed that, if he had been educated, he would have
stayed in the Gambia and serve his country. On the other hand, another informant said he migrated to Nigeria in 1991 to further his education. This was because there was no University in the Gambia at the time. West African migrants believed that as Muslims, dignity of labour and remittances to the family members is a *Jihad* (holy war) against poverty.

Some “stone boys” migrated through their kinsmen and joined the gemstones business. The lucrative nature of gemstones business attracted new migrants who came *en masse*. The affluence displayed by gemstone dealers whenever they visited their home countries influenced the migration of other young men. Musa Toure, 33 years old had the ambition of migrating to Libya and Italy at the age of 22. He was influenced by Gambian migrants who returned with their wealth to buy or build houses in the country. Musa’s parents were displeased with him when he dropped out of school to migrate to Italy and make money. He reached Libya in 2007 and lived with the Gambians who worked as labourers earning 15 dinars per day. Musa was employed by a British Landrover Company. In Libya, he experienced xenophobic attacks like other black Africans and was eventually deported in 2009. In order to raise capital for gemstones business in Ibadan, he got help from his brothers in Spain and USA.

There were two categories of West African immigrants involved in the gemstone business. Majority of immigrants from Guinea, Mali and Senegal had experience in mining business. These West Africans migrated in continuation of an old economic orientation and practice but also in response to political and economic changes in post-colonial Africa. They were driven by cultural factors and economic orientation inherited from their ancestors. This category of gemstones dealers were familiar with the customs of the trade.
On the other hand, the recent migration of a new generation of Gambians to Ibadan was to benefit from the new sources of wealth offered by the mineral rush. The Gambian migration to Ibadan was a response by individuals to new opportunities in the mining sector. For most Gambian immigrants, gemstones trade was a new business experience different from what their predecessors in Nigeria had practiced. They were independent of existing commercial interests of the first generation. The Gambian immigrants in Lagos and Ibadan were associated with Kampala (indigo tye and dye or adire); trade in antiquities; imported clothes; and wrist watches. By the mid-1990s, the Kampala business virtually collapsed due to change in fashion and importation of cheaper clothes from China. Thus, the new generation of immigrants found it profitable to join the lucrative gemstone business. Following the decline in Kampala production, some of the immigrants diversified into gemstone business.

From the above experiences, it is evident, as Akesson (2004) suggests that, migration and economic considerations are often socially embedded and culturally informed. Network theory suggests that networks linking the homeland with kin and friends in the diaspora function as catalysts of further emigration (Brettell 2000, 104-106 and Akesson 2004: 18-19). The “stone boys” operated from the logic of transnationalism which allowed them to move freely across the ECOWAS sub-region and beyond. Mining has generated employment opportunities for many immigrants. According to Ismail Diarra, in 1999 there were about 500 gemstone dealers in Ibadan. By 2005, the population of gemstone dealers increased more than 100 per cent due to the mineral rush. Some of the mining sites had over 5,000 miners at one time.
Only very few among the immigrants had been employed in their countries before migration. Some young Gambians learnt gemstone business for two to three years. In 2009, about 40 Gambians lived at Abuja Leather and Ofiki mines to learn how to buy and sell gemstones. They lived in thatched huts and experienced armed banditry at nights. Subsequently, due to insecurity at the mines, each of the countries represented paid N700.00 while individuals paid N300.00 per week to the mine vigilante called *Bangers* that was set up to provide security. At Komu, gemstone dealers paid N240.00 security fee per person for entry into and departure from the mines. Majority of the young gemstones dealers engaged in the business to survive, send remittances to family members at home or finance their migration to Europe. Those who were deported from Libya in their attempt to cross to Europe returned to Ibadan to continue gemstones business.

The role of the “stone boys” was basically dealership. Between 1994 and 2011, Ibadan not only received a substantial number of gemstones dealers, but gradually developed into the main market of mineral resources in Nigeria. The “stone boys” bought gemstones from the mines at Komu and Igbojaiye, Itesiwaju Local government; and Ofiki in Atisbo local government, over 200 kilometres from Ibadan. Some stayed at the “bush” (mines) for weeks or months before they could get their supplies. Before 2005, a substantial percentage of gemstones trade passed through the “stone boys.” Most of the gemstones in Oyo state and other parts of Nigeria were traded at Ojoo, Ibadan. During this period, gemstone dealers prospered as the prominent middlemen for the trade.
Gemstone dealers also received supplies from other parts of the country. Many dealers from Kano, Maiduguri, Abuja and elsewhere patronise Ojoo gemstone markets for both supply and demand, depending on the market situation. Gemstones are categorised into two: precious (first grade) stones and semi-precious (second-grade) stones. At the Ojoo market, a kilogramme of gemstones was valued at N4,000.00 and N5,000.00, while a kilogramme of semi-precious stones was between N1,000.00 and N2,000.00 depending on the grade. A ton of precious stone was valued at N4million and N5million. Except for the use of weighing measurements and torch lights to ascertain the value of gemstones, the market remains traditional. They bought gemstones from Hausa, Yoruba, Ebira, Igbo; Togolese, Beninoise and Nigerien peasant miners. According to a Malian gemstones dealer his start up capital was $200 and he sold his commodity to the highest bidder.

**Emergence of Mining Frontiers in Ibadan Region**

Post-colonial peasant mining started in Southern Kaduna (Goma Lafia and Kafanchan) at Jamaa Local Government Area in the late 1970s. New mining sites were discovered in Borno state; Idoyi and Okene in Kogi state; Keffi in Nassarawa state and Ijero-Ekiti, Ekiti state in the 1980s. When the precious stones became scarce in Northern Nigeria, peasant miners and West African ‘stone boys’ migrated southwards to new mining frontiers in Ibadan, Oyo State in 1993. Gemstones were discovered at Olode, Ibadan in commercial quantities. Mining activities also started in Komu along the Oyan River.

The new mining frontiers motivated migration of the “stone boys” to the hinterland areas, about 200 kilometres from Ibadan. They established major mining camps at Agate and Abuja Leather
about 27 kilometers from Komu, Itesiwaju Local government; and Ofiki in Atisbo local government. Abuja Leather was developed by the massive influx of the miners. In July 1998, Ofiki and Igbojaiye areas were swamped by “stone boys” when other mines were discovered at Ibudo Are (Igbojaiye area) about 3 miles from Komu. The new mining sites were discovered by Fulani pastoralists (called *pathfinders*). The discovery and mining of gemstones in Komu led to controversies over land acquisition as miners fiercely protected their “territories”.

Komu was opened up to influx of migrants from various parts of Nigeria and West Africa. The population explosion led to unplanned expansion of the community in which socio-economic lives were dislocated. Local youths and women abandoned farming for ‘emergency mining.’ Among the “stone boys”, Senegalese and Malians were the pioneers. They were also regarded as affable in business relationships. By 1991/1992, Malians had dominated mining business in most parts of northern Nigeria. In 1995, some Malians operating in Kafanchan relocated to Bangkok. The population of Senegalese dealers also declined due to their emmigration to Angola and Mozambique. Guineans took over due to their massive migration in the early 2000s.

The major gemstones in Oyo state exported by West African immigrant entrepreneurs included: Tourmalin-Red, Blue, Yellow and Ruby Lite; Quartz; Ganet-Red and Yellow; and Tantalite (not gemstone but industrial material). These gemstones were largely unknown in Yoruba society where they exist in commercial quantities. Mining was pioneered by Hausa peasant miners who discovered and dug the sites. Many of them were involved in accidents while digging pits for gemstones. These retinue of peasant miners were tolerated by the local population because
mining provided greater source of cash for an impoverished rural economy. The rural population took up the advantage of unprecedented commercial opportunities created by the new mineral rush.\(^5\)

**Company Regime and labour relations**

Until 1972, several multi-national corporations operated in the mining sector. Subsequently, mining sector was monopolised by state-owned public corporations which led to the decline in productivity. The ineffective nationalisation of the sector paved way for thousands of informal miners and artisans. Nevertheless, as in the colonial period, mining companies continued to rely on peasant miners. Mining remains a labour intensive sector which require special skills and techniques. Peasant miners were indispensable due to their decisive roles in mining production. In the post-colonial period, indigenous mining companies reproduced labour relations and clientship that sustained colonial mining. The changing production relations in the mining sector affected the fortunes of the peasant miners and “stone boys.” Hausa peasant miners were transformed from peasants into workers. The impact of capital was typically to create surplus casual labour for the sector.

Several companies were formed by individuals and partners for mining and export of gemstones. Most of the companies were owned by Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo but Malians, Guineans and Senegalese also established companies. Companies served as intermediaries between 1997 and 1998 in the host community-miners relations. There were more than 50 mining companies in Nigeria but only 15 were active. One of the companies in Oyo State operate in 30 mine sites in the state and employed over 20,000 workers.
At the early stage, the peasant miners were not responsible to any company. There were competitions among the various stakeholders. The labourers included (Ruso or peasant miners); and company employed miners. Before the company regime, only the strongest peasant miners survived the hurdle and hazards of scrambling for gemstones in the mines. Some were killed through accidents in the mines while others were robbed of their gemstones due to lack of security. For the labourers, it was “Winner takes all. The strongest have it.” Labourers were not trusted by the companies due to high rate of pilfering of gemstones. In all, there was no social trust in mining business.

In Oke-Ogun area, the mineral rush attracted local investors who used their capital and political connections to secure mining licences from the federal government. In 1998, Hausa and Yoruba mining licence owners combined to take over the sites. But labourers resisted the transition from unregulated mining to company regime and refused to leave the sites. The peasant miners resisted the organisation of means of production dictated by capital. In 1998, a massacre of Hausa peasant miners took place as they resisted companies from taking over mining sites. The company owners invited mobile police to banish the numerous peasant miners. Subsequently, the companies employed some of the peasant miners. Violent rivalries later ensued among the competing companies. The companies also clashed and the killing of several people led to the closure of mining sites by the government. Between 2004 and 2005, there were conflicts at Ofiki as peasant miners protested underpayment and cheating by the companies.

Some of the West African immigrants had their own companies. For example, two strong Malian companies employed about 15 peasant miners each. Sanoh Star Mining Company was
established by a Guinean. It was very active in Northern Nigeria but could not get a mining site in Oyo State due to competition with Nigerian companies. Another Guinean Mining Company in Nigeria was Alpha Memorial Gems that was only active in Kafanchan, northern Nigeria. Ismail Diarra, a 49 years old Malian who was born at Cote D’Ivoire established a company in 2007 and employed Nigerian peasant miners. Only few “stone boys” formed partnership with Nigerian owned companies to survive in the sector.

The “stone boys” alleged that they were excluded from all sectors of mining operations by the Nigerian companies. The Nigerian companies imposed themselves and forced immigrants to work under them. At Abuja Leather, Guineans claimed that they financed two mining pits, but after three years of hard labour, the peasant miners were bullied by the Nigerian companies to sell gemstones to them. According to a “stone boy”, “gemstones passed through a company before it enters the market. Without a company, no gemstones business.” This new arrangement undermined the rate of supplies of gemstones by peasant miners to the “stone boys.” In some sites, due to mechanisation, peasant miners can no longer cope with the sharing arrangement which allows companies to have ¾ of gemstones while peasant miners have ¼. Under the company regime, the mining sector is now well organised compared to what it used to be.

Companies often stockpile gemstones for six months before sharing and selling. Gemstone dealers are required to buy from companies. But companies at the mining sites do not allow gemstones to go out again. Companies have offices in Bangkok and therefore, export directly. In the process, they exclude other dealers, mostly “stone boys”. Due to scarcity of gemstones, migrants continue to experience hardship. Majority of gemstone dealers have become Okada
(commercial motorcycle) riders. Indeed, there is no cordial relationship between the “stone boys” and companies. At a certain point, there was a conflict between Hausa dealers and “stone boys”. This was because some of the Hausa peasant miners prefer to sell their share of the gemstones to “stone boys” who were accused of encouraging pilfering of gemstones at the mines. In 2001 and 2003, they were asked to leave the mining sites to the city. Even though the controversies have been resolved, the rivalries still exist. The company regime impoverished the “stone boys.” However, the few “stone boys” in the business owed their hold on the lucrative trade to their commercial heritage.

Initially, the companies paid the peasant miners for digging and mining but now, “stone boys” sponsor the process. They provide food and materials for the peasant miners throughout the mining process. The companies only engage in land lease, maintenance of peace and security, insurance and act as the link with the government. Gemstones are shared between the labourers and companies. The “stone boys” buy from the peasant miners. However, less powerful companies do finance the operations of the peasant miners. In most cases, major companies monopolised the sector and exclude other players. In the rivalry over gemstones trade, the companies and Hausa traders used the politics of citizenship and official connections to dominate the sector.

The “stone boys” established clientele relationship with peasant miners and petty traders. This business strategy was similar to the Lebanese diamond traders in Sierra-Leone (Leighton, 1974: 25). They bind peasant miners to themselves through cash advances and ‘debt cycle.’ The middlemen position was crucial to the mining sector and capital accumulation. Like the
Lebanese in Sierra-Leone diamond sector, West African gemstones dealers advanced money to peasant miners to buy equipment, medical and food supplies. In this clientele arrangement, peasant miners were obliged to bring gemtones to the benefactor for appraisal and purchase. Most of gemstones dealers had several peasant miners who supply them with the commodity under the clientele arrangement. Dealers also advanced money to itinerant Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo traders who were expected to purchase gemstones from peasant miners and other small-scale diggers. In some cases, peasant miners often default in supplying gemstones to the dealers after several years of clientship and investment. As a result, some dealers lost capital and became bankrupt in the process. This situation forced many of the immigrant entrepreneurs into emigration or liquidation of business.

Social Networks of the “stone boys”

Identity formation and articulation among West African migrants are in terms of temporality. The entrepreneurship of the “stone boys” led to the development of widely dispersed social relationships. The “stone boys” created kinship networks connecting distant towns, communities and countries. The “stone boys” known as Yan Dutse in Hausa constituted a new generation of wealthy immigrant entrepreneurs in Ibadan during the 1990s and early 2000s. Most of them sent remittances to and/or visited their home countries frequently to take care of their family members. It has become a traditional obligation for West African immigrants to remit money to their home communities and families. Unlike Hausa in Ibadan or elsewhere, West African immigrants live and work among the Yoruba local population, engage in dialogue and daily interaction which reduces hostility. To a great extent, the Yoruba host community respected the “stone boys” for their sanctity. More significantly, Ibadan developed cosmopolitan character and
has been hospitable to foreign traders and internal migrants over the years. As one of the immigrants described the relationship, Yoruba hosts are accommodating because immigrants conduct themselves appropriately.

The Malian, Guinean, Senegalese and Gambian “stone boys” worked together and formed networks. Language identity was prevalent among the West African immigrants. In the precious stone business, Madingo has become a commercial language which allow immigrants to construct inclusion and exclusion in the business. Madingo is widely spoken among the gemstones dealers from Senegal, Gambia, Mali and Guinea. Madingo, Hausa and pidgin English were the predominant business languages among the “stone boys.”

In 1994, non-Nigerian entrepreneurs formed Gemstone Dealers Association. Its primary aim was to have representation and to avoid confrontation with one another by settling business quarrels peacefully. Partnerships among the gemstone dealers were often short-lived due to lack of proper accounting, illiteracy and different perspectives partners had on the business. Most business partnerships were based on traditional business practices and social trust without any written records. There were cases of mismanagement of funds due to different lifestyles among the partners. Most of the partnerships operated at a loss.

West African immigrants were free in Ibadan and interacted with other residents such that they felt been at home. In fact, many of them considered Ibadan their second home. According to Muhammad Jabbi from Guinea who migrated to Ibadan in 2000, “I have lived peacefully in
In the process, Ibadan is building an inclusive city. Social intercourse in the neighbourhoods created trans-national practices.

In 2000, Mali Youth Association was formed mainly by the young gemstone dealers. The aim was to bring Malian youths together, support them in developing their business and assist them in case of arrest by the police and immigration officials. Guinean Community Office, Ibadan was set up in 2000. It was established as an umbrella body of all Guinean clans represented in Ibadan. Members of each clan contribute to the development of their community. The Gambian High Commission set up an Ibadan office in 2006. Immigrants were encouraged to register with the federal government under a new name: The Gambian Welfare Association, Ibadan.

Although the “stone boys” preserved their cultural ethos and kinship system, they intermarried with the Yoruba host community and other Nigerians, inaugurating thus another process of integration in West Africa. The association of Nigerian Women Married to West Africans was formed in 2009.

In some cases, families often resisted the marriage of their daughters to foreigners whose cultures are different. There are also apprehensions that children from such marriages could be denied Nigerian citizenship. Most Yoruba women who married “stone boys” have separated due to difficulties of adjustment to a new culture and social life. Many of them had to ensure that the children are brought up as Malians, Guineans, Gambians and Senegalese. There were cases of “stone boys” who married Yoruba girls and took them to their countries or Asia. Malians,
Senegalese and Gambians in Ibadan continue to live a communal and traditional life as opposed to the aspirations for modernity among urban Yoruba women.

The immigrants were apprehensive of losing everything, especially business opportunities and cultural identity. It has been challenging for them to raise their children as Muslims, French and/or local (Mande) language speakers. Most of their children speak Yoruba and imbibed Yoruba cultural ethos. This was why many immigrants enforced that their local dialect should be spoken at home. In 2003, Guinean Muslim Association in Ibadan was formed. Its aim was to ensure that Guineans in Ibadan live as Muslims in a multicultural environment by following Sunnah and avoid social behaviour antithetical to Islam. Quranic studies were organised for children in various neighbourhoods occupied by the immigrants. Despite their commercial success, West African ‘stone boys’ resisted integration into the host community.

Immigrant entrepreneurs created leisure spaces, tea/coffee shops and restaurants in the vicinity of gemstones market, Ojoo to reproduce cultural habits of their homeland in the city. The drinking of ataya, Chinese tea was prevalent among West African immigrants in Ibadan. In these leisure spaces, immigrants engaged in new debates on transnational forms of community, modernity, home and diaspora dialogue, travels, business opportunities and money.

Majority of them lived in rented apartments. Only very few “stone boys” own houses in Ibadan. James Reshers postulates a theory of social choice in his, “principle of social desirability” which suggests that the choice of a residential place in an urban area depends on three principal factors: economic considerations, affinity with those with similar characteristics and aversion for those
with unlike characteristics. The residential choice of the West African migrants was a strategic way by which they integrated into the host community. In most cases, West African immigrants often participated in the social functions of their Yoruba host community; and *vice versa*. The lack of readiness of the immigrants to own a house in the city depicts absence of economic altruism that promotes unconventional system of integration in West Africa.

Everyday interaction and communication in the mixed neighbourhoods minimised social distances between the Yoruba host community and the West African migrants. The street in the city is a specific place involved in the symbolisation, negotiation, and regulation of identity, meaning and power through the image (cited in Adisa, p. 93). Indeed, the high rate of urbanisation reflects considerable diversity in values. Being a multi-cultural setting, different actors co-existed in the same space to earn a living. At Old Bank Ojoo, West African gemstones dealers co-existed with Nigerian women traders, food vendors, hair dressers; male artisans, traders, street hawkers and sex workers.

The clustering of traders, dealers, sex workers and artisans produced a new urban ethnicity. Majority of the Yoruba in Ibadan considered West African “stone boys” as Hausa and were treated as such. They were categorised as Hausa due to the religion of Islam and culture. In some cases, they were all regarded as Senegalese. They were hardly identified by their countries of origin but collectively regarded as Hausa or Senegalese. This identification process was an offshoot of corporate commercial diaspora which disregarded, in some ways, the artificial colonial boundaries in order to maintain traditional socio-economic ties that existed among the various groups for several centuries.
The identification of West African immigrants as Hausa, in some cases, gave them advantage of being treated as Nigerians. The wider ethnic labels obscured a wide range of cleavages and rivalries that existed in the gemstones business. Identification with the Hausa gave the West African migrants power of legitimacy to engage in their entrepreneurial activities. The ambiguity of identity enabled “stone boys” to negotiate their belonging as citizens of ECOWAS, African brothers and economic immigrants. However, most of the West African immigrants were considered illegal immigrants due to their high population in the city and lack of readiness to cooperate with immigration officials in the biometric data registration.

**Export of Gemstones**

Pioneer exporters of gemstones from Nigeria were Guineans, Malians and Senegalese. In the past, Yoruba and Hausa travelled with Malian, Gambian and Guinean passports. This was because during the military years in the 1990s, Nigerian passports were not reckoned with abroad. In recent time, export of gemstones has been dominated by Hausa and Gambian dealers. They bought raw gemstones and exported to international market outlets. Gemstone dealers often had knowledge of the global market shared to them by their networks and kinsmen in Thailand, Dubai and elsewhere. Gemstones export usually pass through Lagos airport *en route* France to Asia. Exporters often paid customs duties on the gemstones at the airport.

Gemstones were sold to companies in Dubai during trade fairs. They also exported gemstones to Hong Kong, Bangkok and USA where they were used as raw materials in the production of jewelry. Due to their global mobility, “stone boys” were directly tied to the international
Mining and Rural Economy

Many businesses developed in the rural areas due to mining activities. These included transportation, food distribution, petty trading in provisions, cloth trade, sex work and so on. By this, mining sites became centre of attraction for economic activities. The activities of “stone boys” and peasant miners boosted petty trading and transportation in the rural areas.

Throughout the last decade, peasant mining in Oke-Ogun area of Oyo was unchecked and unregulated by government agencies leaving the area with large scale degradation and deforestation. With virtually no access road to the mines, it has become difficult to monitor the system of mining adopted and environmental impact on the people. Peasant miners carried out their activities without any recourse to the environmental and social implication of their activities on the host community. Farmers were displaced, following peasant mining and land devastation from the main source of livelihood. Indeed, land previously available for agriculture was taken over by peasant miners and the unplanned solid mineral rush. Most of the hitherto farming communities were no longer sustainable for agricultural purposes due to deep holes, gullies and mining ponds which exposed land to the risk of erosion. As such, the abundant solid minerals were exploited without consumerate advantage to the rural community. The striking economic change was the loss of farmlands and labour to peasant mining. Komu was described as a community “where the ground has open wounds.” According to the traditional ruler, the Oniro
of Komu, Oba Johnson Oyebamiji Oyedokun, “These people go about digging holes that they do not bother to fill back. Some of these holes are so big that it would take a miracle for a person or livestock to survive the fall. And we have hunters going into these areas to hunt at night.” Some of the holes are more than 20 ft deep.

Due to federal government control and exclusive rights on solid minerals, states and local government endowed with such resources do not benefit directly from the miners. It has become an arduous task for state governments to regulate the menace of peasant miners and mining companies who are mainly interested in economic gains. Mining activities were done without precautionary measures on either the safety of the labourers or land reclamation. Moreso, indigenous cultural lifestyle of the mining community was dislocated as miners introduced trans-national practices.

By learning from the Niger Delta uprising against oil companies, Federal Government of Nigeria requested all mining companies to sign Community Development Agreements in the mining areas. As prescribed in the mining edit, AHMU has built Community Hall at Komu. The company offered scholarships to three indigenes of Komu, provided health care unit, donated 20 computers, classrooms and generating set to Itasa community at Iwere-Ile. Between 2003 and 2004, Guinean gemstone dealers built two Mosques and Community House at Aget village, Komu, Itesiwaju Local Government, Oyo State. They also established cordial relationship with community leaders and indigenous population. However, a substantial number of the rural population are excluded from the wealth and opportunities which the gemstones generated. The corporate responsibility of the mining companies are not coordinated and sustainable. Indeed,
there is no substantial feedback on the huge revenue from gemstones export to the rural communities. The most important cause of economic disequilibrium which lie beneath gemstones trade was capital flight.

**Challenges of Peasant Mining**

Mining business is characterised by several challenges, uncertainties, risks and unpredictability of investment and profit. There was no standard business in gemstones, it remains traditional. The business was not regulated and there was no control price. Mining business, therefore, required perseverance. In June 2001, about 600 peasant miners were killed in various mining operations at Ofiki, Ibudo-Are, Oro, Iganna, Sepeteri and other areas of Oyo state. At least, ten peasants died daily from peasant mining operations in Oyo state between 2001 and 2011. Beyond lost of lives, for many years, “stone boys” operated as traditional miners and traders. Gemstone business was not organised and migrants often lose their investments. Bandjoucou Bajayoko, a 34 years old Malian came to Ibadan in 2001 trading in clothes between Nigeria and Mali. With a startup capital of $1,800, he sponsored many labourers between 2005 and 2009. He formed partnership with an Hausa man at Abuja Leather but after gemstones were discovered, the Hausa man drove him out in 2009. Majority of the miners were Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba partly because West African migrants did not have entry permit into the mines. Migrant miners without company papers are often arrested. “Stone boys” therefore, depended on supplies from the companies and labourers. In recent time, the challenges facing West African gemstone dealers have been compounded by the involvement of Chinese buyers who penetrate the mining communities and sites with huge capital. Some of the Chinese buyers also buy from West
African dealers. Miners have experienced armed banditry due to the raw cash they carried to the mining sites.

**Role of the Government**

Gemstones was classified as “controlled” minerals by the Nigerian government. In actually sense, however, it has remained uncontrolled as manifested by the high rate of peasant mining and illegal export. Before the oil boom in the 1970s, Nigerian economy was sustained partly by revenue from solid minerals which contributed about 10 per cent to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Since the oil boom era, solid minerals sector remained a peasant industry, dormant and unregulated. By 2011, the sector contributes less than one per cent to the GDP. According to the National Bureau of Statistics, the sector contributes only 0.36 per cent to the GDP in the second quarter of 2011.

Due to over-dependence on crude oil as the main source of export earning, there has been an apparent neglect of the solid mineral sector by the government. Attempts been made to regulate the sector and control multitude of miners has been very slow. This led to widespread informal mining activities all over the country. Informal miners and artisans deprived the federal government a veritable source of revenue, estimated to be $20billion per year. The Nigerian Mining Corporation (NMC) was formed in 1972 by the Federal government and revived in 1990 with the mandate of prospecting for, exploiting and trading in all solid minerals other than iron ore and coal. However, NMC remains a weak institution because it does not have the mandate, inclination or capacity to manage environmental and social issues.
Since 1999, a wide range of reforms were introduced to transform the sector in order to generate foreign exchange earnings and boost the economy. Government issued licences to companies owned by Nigerians and foreigners in an attempt to privatise the solid minerals sector. The new Mining Act was passed in 2007 and regulated in 2010 but it has not been fully implemented. It was meant to create an investor-friendly regulatory framework. Most of the West African gemstones dealers are not exploring these new regulatory regimes due to lack of capital and awareness. In 2006, government established Solid Minerals Buying Centres in the six geopolitical zones of the country to promote the solid mineral business. The centres were meant to stabilise trade in solid minerals by buying the products from artisan miners and warehousing the minerals. Most of the Buying Centres were abandoned.

The new Act made provisions for ECOWAS citizens to participate in the sector. As a corollary to the above efforts, Oyo state government made attempts to control the operations of artisans and small-scale miners in the state. In 1999, the governor of Oyo state, Lam Adesina, sanctioned small-scale miners and restricted their operations through deployment of police and soldiers. Some of them were repugnant by continuing with the business. Others went to Bangkok or returned to their home countries. There were those who engaged in petty businesses in Ibadan.

In 2004, Oyo State government mandated dealers and peasant miners to register with the Solid Minerals Association and formalise their operations. This was an attempt to monitor the activities of the gemstone dealers and peasant miners as a group in the state. On their own, stakeholders in the sector formed Grand Patron of Solid Mineral Workers Association, Oyo State. They also formed International Miners Association in Ibadan to prevent Police
harrassment. The association was headed by Alhaji Dahiru Liman who served as Special Adviser on Mineral Resources to Oyo State government from 1999 to 2009.

In 2010, government planned the establishment of Gemstone Centre in Ibadan and Jos as part of the Gemstone Development Programme. It was meant to provide opportunities for government to collect Royalty at the point of export, create a buying and export centre and a one stop shop to fast-track government export control.

There were official and popular concerns over losses of foreign exchange earnings as a result of peasant mining and exports of solid minerals resources in Nigeria. But “stone boys” continued their economic roles as dealers, financiers and exporters due to their entrepreneurial experience in gemstones business. Most dealers benefited from defects in the laws to export gemstones. Under defective laws, they continued to aid the perpetuation of peasant mining. There are no laws to checkmate uncontrolled export of gemstones from the country or arrest unregistered gemstone dealers. Most of security agents and customs officers at the airport could not recognise gemstones. Some officials were complicit in the unregulated export of gemstones. As a result, the collapse of official regulations led to a general informalisation of mining activities and illegal export.

Conclusion
Nigeria’s potential of becoming a major exporter of gemstones to the global market was undermined by its underdevelopment. Due to dependence on petro-dollars, the mining sector has not played a catalyst role in the productive sector of the economy. Government negligence of the mining sector encouraged the operations of artisan miners and unregulated export of the resources by the “stone boys.” This had significant impact on the loss of revenue and opportunity for industrial development. Government agencies and functionaries have expressed concern over illegal mining and export of gemstones from the country, but enforcement of legislations remains ineffective. Due to policy inconsistency and instability, ambitious projects remained on the drawing board without implementation.

Through examination of individual migration histories, majority of West African immigrants in the city of Ibadan had migrated to various parts of the Africa and other continents seeking improvement in their socio-economic status. Majority of the “stone boys” were influenced by their commercial heritage. West African immigrants maintained ties to their home countries and resisted assimilation to Yoruba society despite the splendid hospitality they received. This manifested in their social networks, social life, remittances and diaspora voting. By 2008, there was total failure in the mining business in Nigeria which seriously affected the immigrants. Many lost their capitals in the process. Only very few, especially Nigerian (Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa) investors benefitted from the decline. From 2008, mining business could not be done without companies. Nigerians established Indigenous Dealers Association to promote their own businesses in the competitive environment. They encouraged cooperation among the participants and supported each other in the business. On the other hand, commitment to networks among the “stone boys” did not yield capital mobilisation or safeguard entrepreneurs against the vagaries of
a competitive sector. Since 2009, Gemstone markets in Europe plummeted due to the ravaging economic crises. The market remained slow in Asia where demand had thrived. The declining demand for gemstone in Asia affected the business in Nigeria.

Consequently, rather than sending remittances, immigrants received money from other diasporas and families back home. Kinsmen in Europe, USA or homeland often send money to strengthen their financial base or as transport fare to “evacuate” them home or migrate to other African countries. Rather than becoming strangers or face humiliation at home, “stone boys” preferred to stay in the diaspora until life was better. Others find lucrative opportunities in Angola, Zimbabwe and Mozambique but left their families behind in Ibadan. In 2007, about 1, 260 Malians formed part of West African immigrants who travelled to Mozambique for gemstone trade. Many returned to buy properties in Ibadan.

The gemstones market at Ojoo reduced drastically due to the exodus of the dealers. Most of the shops were abandoned because “stone boys” had no money to pay rents. Many of the West African immigrants coped with alternative businesses-Okada riding, importation of tokunbo cars, scrap business and so on. Their wives started trading to assist husbands in household income. Some of the women were attached to Yoruba tailors for training. Many died from Okada business. In this process, two discourses intersected: wealth and poverty; industry and idleness, fundamentally changed the tradition of remittances and home visits among the immigrants. In order to protect their good name and maintain their honour, they humbly engaged in Okada. Immigrants struggled to maintain dignity of labour amid urban crises and shrinking commercial opportunities. The population of Guineans in Nigeria plummeted from 14,000 in 2000 to 9,000 in
2011. In Oyo State, the population of Guineans declined from 3,500 to 800. Guinean clans in Ibadan reduced drastically from 18 in 2000 to 8 in 2011. Above all, among the West African ‘stone boys’, the desire to make money far outweigh the aspirations for integration in West Africa.

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Endnotes

1 This statistics seems unrealistic
2 Oral interview
3 The first University in the Gambia was established in 1999.
4 Oral interview
5 In the past, the rural communities in the Upper River Ogun (Oke-Ogun) had tolerated the violence of Bororo Fulani pastoralists.
6 Oral interview
7 Dipo Fashina, « Komu : Where the ground has ‘open wounds, » in Nigerian Tribune, 5 November, 2010
8 Dipo Fashina, « Komu : Where the ground has ‘open wounds, » in Nigerian Tribune, 5 November, 2010
9 In February 2012, about 15 Chinese were arrested for illegal mining in Ghana. Illegal mining has destroyed water bodies and farmlands in the country. « 15 Chinese arrested for illegal Mining » in Daily Graphic, 7 February, 2012.