

Migrant narratives from Ghana

The following migrant narratives are edited versions of life story interviews with Ghanaian return migrants in 2012 and 2013. The interviews have been conducted and edited by Nauja Kleist, DIIS.

Mr Kojo Owusu: I bought a map of Africa and went off

Mr. Kojo Owusu was born in Ghana in 1957. He is a pioneer migrant who travelled to Libya in 1988 as the first man from his village. At that time he was 32 years old and had been working as a farmer to help his parents take care of his nine younger siblings. Having an adventurous spirit, Mr. Owusu has lived in three different African countries as well as in Canada. He has two children and three grandchildren. One of his brothers stays in the UK but has built a house in the village where Mr. Owusu now lives with his wife. He came back to Ghana in 2011.

It all started at my grandmother's funeral. She died in a village nearby and when I went to her funeral, I noticed that some of my friends were not there. So I asked some people where they were. They told me that they had gone to Libya to hustle for money. After the funeral I got a map of Africa and found Libya. I will go too, I thought. So I went to inform my father. 'Father', I said, 'we are many, altogether ten children. We are doing too much farm work but with no results, so I want to travel'. My father asked me where I wanted to go. I told him Libya. 'Where?' he asked again. Then I told him North Africa and showed him where Libya is located on the Africa map. He said 'okay, no problem'.

So I made my preparations, got my money and set off for Libya. My father helped me with some money too. I left my village on the 18th of December 1988. I took the map and hid it in my

bag. Whenever I came to a new place, I took it out, checked where I was, and then I proceeded. First I travelled alone but I met four people in Bamako who were going the same way: two from Senegal, one from Gambia and one from Guinea

Conakry. We passed through Algeria before we entered Libya. By then I had spent one good month on the road.

From Libya to Canada to Ghana

In Libya, I went to Benghazi because I knew would find my people there, from my area. I found work and had enough money. After six months, my junior brother came to Benghazi as well. I had written a letter to my family about the place so he and some other people came to join me there. One day my junior brother called me and told that he was going back to Ghana. 'Why and what are you going to do?', I asked him. 'We have done farming for so many years and nothing comes out of it'. So I decided to help him go to Europe instead, and he went to Britain. He still lives there. At that time, there was no Western Union like today so it was very difficult to send money back home. You had to hide it inside a cassette tape, and send it by mail, and you couldn't send more than maybe 100 or 200 dollars. If somebody found the money, they would steal it. So I thought that it was better that my brother went to Europe where he can earn money than if I should send money to provide for him in Ghana all the time.

After one more year, I told my brother that now I wanted to travel to Japan and Canada. I first went to Tunis to go to Japan but I didn't have the right papers and had to go back to Libya. Then I decided to try the Canada connection and my brother in the UK helped me. I went to Switzerland and then to Montreal in Canada. I stayed there for two-and-a-half years but I was only working for the last five months. I didn't have any working or residence permit and when the authorities found out, they deported me back to Ghana. That was in 1994.

I believe everything will be alright

Life here is very hard, you know, so I planned to travel again. I went to Liberia in 1996. There was still civil war there and it was too hard so I continued to Sierra Leone. There was a war there too but I found work as a driver for a company. But because of the war, you know, things were very bad, things were hard, and everything was expensive, so I decided to return to Ghana. Also my brother in Britain had called me and told me that I should go back to Ghana so that we could start a business together. But when I came back, he disappointed me and I couldn't do anything anyway. So I did some farming again. After a few years, I decided to go to Libya one more time. I

went in 2003 and did different kinds of work. During the last time, I worked for a big company in Gaddafi's hometown. Sometimes, the company will gather your salary for six months before they pay you. When the war broke out, I had worked for five months without pay. But life is precious so I came back to Ghana without any money. I just came back with my clothes and shoes.

I have used the money I have earned abroad to pay for my children's education and to start a farm here. It's always been my dream to start a poultry farm; that was the plan that made me travel in the first place – even though I haven't managed to realize it so far. The big challenge in Ghana is that everything depends on money. So if only I had money, I could make something big. My wife is always helping me and by the grace of God, I have strength to do whatever I need to do. I go to church and I pray to God to give me enough strength to fulfil what I have planned, and I always believe in my heart that in some years to come, things will be alright.

Glossary

Hustle: Pidgin English term for getting by through various kinds of informal work or activities

Kwame Boateng: I have learnt so many things from traveling

Kwame was born in Ghana in 1971. He has lived and worked in several North African and European countries and has been deported twice from Europe. In spite of the difficulties of returning as a deportee, Kwame is now a respected man in town where he lives in his own house and works as a farmer. His story reveals some of the risks when traveling and working without papers but also shows how migration can be a livelihood strategy.

I left Ghana before I finished secondary school, I just wanted to travel. I had compared my situation to those people in town who had worked abroad: How they came back with money and the way they did their things, and then I decided not to proceed with school but to travel instead. When the urge to travel like that comes to you, you get so eager and you cannot think about anything else; it's like wanting to marry, like everything you want to do is over there.

I went to Libya in 1991. I passed through the desert and worked there for four and a half year. Then I went to Morocco and took a boat to Spain. It was very, very dangerous. We paid about 1,300 USD to enter the boat. It was a very small boat but we were 16 people in there. So you have to do everything in pairs. You sit down in pairs; if you want to stand up, you will stand up in pairs. If not, the boat will sink and you will drown. There were seven boats which left together but only three of them made it to Spain. The rest sunk.

In Spain we were detained for three weeks in a camp and then we could go. I didn't have a working permit but you can still get work. But the employer will cheat you because you don't have papers. So you will work for a while – say, they

should pay you 1,000 Euros but they only pay you 700 Euros, maybe just 600. And if you utter a word, they will turn you over to the police who will arrest you. So after one and half years I decided to go to the Netherlands but the police arrested me and they sent me back to Spain. And in Spain they deported me to Morocco where they deported me to Ghana. That was in 1998.

From Ghana to Sweden and back again

It was very difficult to come back to Ghana. I was so shocked! I was sending money to my parents when I was in Libya and Spain to use for a house but they had just eaten the money, they had chopped it. I was very disappointed and very angry. I had 4,000 dollars with me and I decided not to give this money to anybody. So I put 2,000 dollars in the bank and used 2,000 dollars to travel again. I went to Libya again that same year and from there to Tunisia and then Italy. I spent two years there and then there was an opportunity to go to Sweden with a boat. After four days, we came to a small town in Sweden. I met a farmer and he asked me if I wanted to work for him. I stayed on his farm. He paid me 1,300 dollars per month and I used some of the money to pay for rent and for my phone, electricity and water bills.

One day, I got a phone call from one of my old friends in Spain. He told me that he was in the capital of Sweden, and that I should go there because the payment is higher than in the countryside. So I took the train to Stockholm but the moment I sat down in the train, the police came and asked about my papers. I didn't have a visa, and they told me they were going to imprison me. I asked, 'what, am I a thief? I am

just traveling, I am here to work!’ Finally, they gave me a place to sleep for three days. I had a passport from Niger, so they deported me to Niger and from there I went to Ghana by bus.

Europe is not easy

Returning empty-handed to Ghana is not easy. People will talk about you if you don’t build a house or start a business. They will begin to undermine you. But for me, I had saved money during my time abroad, so I could buy a plot of land and put up a house. I also married. I have learnt so many things from traveling. In Libya, I learnt how to plaster and how to paint; in Spain I learnt how to make tiles and do plumbing work; I plucked apples in Italy; and in Sweden, I worked with animals. I have also cleaned hotel rooms. So I have a lot of experience.

Now people come to me for advice. But when people ask me about traveling, I tell them that Europe is not easy. I have a lot of Ghanaian

friends who live in Germany, Spain, Tunisia, and Italy. They will tell you that the place is good, the place is fine but they won’t tell you about their work. And if you go there, you see that some people don’t have any place to sleep. They sleep at the back of somebody’s house or on the street. They don’t have place to stay because they don’t have papers.

Today God has blessed me and I don’t have any problems. My dream is to send my children to study in Europe so that they will become somebody in the future. I will open an account for them so they will not suffer. I want to lay a good foundation for them, yeah.

Glossary

Eat money: To spend money on consumption, especially food

Chop money: Pidgin English expression for ‘eating money’



Local market, Ghana.

Kwesi Essien: I never want to travel again

Kwesi was born in Ghana in 1977. He has a diploma in IT and dreams of establishing his own business. He lives in a small town but is constantly on the move, trying to establish business contacts. Kwesi believes in his dream but it is difficult starting a business in Ghana without any start-up capital. And he is broke, sharing a room with his junior brother in his parents' house. This was not the plan: Kwesi had saved 12,000 dollars in Libya when he had to flee from the war in 2011 and lost all his money.

It was my best friend who inspired me to travel to Libya. He had gone there and came with money and then went to Germany. People were talking about how you work for one or two years in Libya, and then you'll have money to do something. I was very nervous, because I don't like to travel but I didn't have money, so I needed to go.

If you lose your feet, you die

I left in 2005. I took a bus to Burkina Faso and then to Agadez in Niger. From there we went on the top of a Toyota pick-up truck. We were about 24-26 people, sitting very close. You bring all the water you need on the road and wear most of your clothes because it's very cold at night. We traveled through the desert in Niger and Algeria for five days. Then the driver stopped and told us that we had to walk the last distance on foot. We had to follow a guide and climb a very rocky mountain for four or five hours. You need to be very strong to do that because if you lose your feet, nobody is going to wait for you, and you die.

After that you're exhausted but there is only little time to sleep.

The next morning we started to walk very early. It was late afternoon when we saw a town in the distance, called Ghât. We were thinking it was very close but it was still very far away and we had to keep walking. At midnight we could hear some dogs barking so we split up in groups of about five to six people. We finally got out on a road and went to a farm. We had reached Libya!

I felt very weak after this journey. My feet were swollen and some of my toenails had fallen off. I rested for a week and then I looked for work. I met a Ghanaian man who worked as a mason, so I learnt to do masonry too. One day I called one of my cousins who lives in America. I told him that my job in Libya was very tedious and that I would like to go to Spain via Morocco. He sent me 2,300 USD and then I went to Algeria and Morocco but we were arrested on the border. The Moroccan authorities deported us back to Algeria where the police deported us to the border of Mali. They just left us in the desert, in a no-man's land, pointing us in the direction we should walk. From there I went to Bamako and then back to Ghana on my own.

No need to go to Europe

When I came back I started to look for another job. But some years later, in 2008, I decided to go back to Libya. This time I got a good job, so I decided to stay there. The salary was fine, I lived in a free flat, I had telephone credit, Internet and everything. So there was no need for me to go to Europe this time. I saved money and the company opened a bank account for my salary. I

also heard people talk about the crisis in Europe, so I decided that I am not going there. I sent some money back to Ghana to support my family and kept the money I wanted to use for my future business in the bank in Libya. Everything was fine until the war.

The war came unexpected. Those of us who were far from the city or from an airport had difficulties leaving because you don't know who you're going to meet on the road and if they will kill you. And you couldn't go to the bank and withdraw your money. So I decided to stay. I was hiding in a house with three Libyan families. It was in the war zone and the place was full of rebels and the military. Then one day, some Red Crescent volunteers came to the house. They were shocked to see me and told me it was too dangerous to stay and that I had to leave. In the end I flew back to Ghana from Cairo. I had 600 dollars in cash which I used on the ticket. I had to leave 12,000 dollars in the Libyan bank, and it burnt down during the war. So whatever I had was lost.

Traveling is like an adventure

It's not easy to come back like that. Maybe your family and friends were expecting you to support their business or their children in school, maybe your brothers, your sisters, but when you cannot meet any of these expectations, they look at you with different eyes than when you were outside. Sometimes I regret traveling. I was teaching IT before I went to Libya and some of my students have good jobs now. I could have made it big, if I had stayed in Ghana. But traveling is like an adventure. There will be a lot of hardship but it will teach you a lesson in your life. Even though I have lost so much, I am stronger than before and I know many things. The day has come and whether it is good or bad, you have to face it. That's how I look at it.

Glossary

Outside: abroad



Liquor shop owned by a Ghanaian return migrant from New York

John Appiah: I only came back with an empty bag

John was born in Ghana in 1980 and grew up in a village in a family of ten children. His mother died when he was 13 years old. Not having gone much to school, John has had problems earning enough money to support his family. In 2006, when he was 26 years old, he decided to travel to Libya and, perhaps, onwards to Europe to make money. He has tried his luck three times. In 2013 John was back in Ghana after two unsuccessful journeys. He was unemployed and shared a rented room with his wife and two children.

I couldn't continue going to school when my mother died. Nobody helped me, so I had to start making my own money. I did different kinds of jobs and I learnt to drive. I also married and got two children, a boy and a girl. After a while I could buy a very old car to use as a taxi but the money I made from driving too small to support my family so I sold the car to go to Europe. That was in 2006. I gave the money to a connection man in Accra but he squandered all my money and never gave me a visa. It was like I had climbed to the top and then I fell down. I was so disappointed. I returned to my village as I had to look after my family.

In 2008, I had a bit of money again. This time, I decided to go to Libya rather than Europe. I worked as a mason in Tripoli. Then the war came in 2011 and my family was pleading me to come back so I decided to return. It wasn't my intention to come back home like that. I had some money in the bank but all the banks had closed because of the war, so I had to leave the money there. I also had some dollars in my pocket but some rebels attacked me and stole them. I only brought back one bag, and it was empty.

I had sent money back to my family in Ghana while I worked in Libya and I had also managed to save a little bit. When I came back, I borrowed some more money in the bank to buy a taxi but the car was old and broke down all the time. In the end I sold the car and started to trade charcoal between my village and Accra, our capital. I used an old truck to transport the charcoal but it also broke down and all the money I had spent on the business was gone. So I made up my mind to go to Libya again to get my money that I had left there and to find work.

A difficult journey

This time I left with three friends. We each borrowed 1,500 Ghana Cedis [approximately 750 USD] from the bank, pretending we would use the money for business because you cannot borrow money from the bank to go to Libya. We left our village December 18, 2012, on a Tuesday. We took off without telling anybody; only my wife and children knew that I was going. It was a difficult journey. When we reached Libya, we were kidnapped by armed robbers and held hostage for three weeks. I was afraid to die. If nobody can pay for you, they will hurt you badly and kill you. We were only released after some friends' paid ransom for us.

But our problems were not over. We were caught by the Libyan police on the way to Gatron in the southern part of Libya. They put us in prison with a lot of other Africans. It was terrible conditions and they were beating us. Even animals would be treated better. I considered hanging myself. In the end they deported us. They put us in trucks and drove us to Agadez. We were so many

people in the trucks, maybe 500 people, from Gambia, Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Zambia, Congo Kinshasa and Ghana. We spent five days on the road. Then they left us to our own survival. We had to beg on the street to pay the bus back to Ghana. We were back in the village just two months after we had left. My family was happy that I am alive but also worried about how to pay the bank.

I don't understand the world any longer

Now I stay most of the time in my room. I don't go out, I don't do anything. My wife sells bananas but she is not making a lot of money. So I only eat in the evening when my wife prepares food for the children. I don't understand the world any longer. In Ghana, men are supposed to look after the women, not the other way around. But I came back empty-handed, and I am not working, so I cannot help my family. I am always thinking about what to do and how to get money. We live in a rented room, and I don't know what to do if the rent is raised. I haven't been able to sleep since I returned. My wife worries about me, so I will just close my eyes, so that she doesn't notice I am not sleeping. I am praying that I will get some money because it's very difficult to get a job here in Ghana, if you haven't gone to school. Then I will travel again so that I can get money and come back and look after my family.

John went to Libya for the third time in May 2013.

Glossary

Small money: Pidgin English term for little money

Connection man: Person who facilitates international migration, such as arranging visas and tickets, in relation to both regular and irregular migration.

Ghana Cedis: Ghanaian currency.